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A MARCH IN THE RANKS

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BY

JESSIE FOTHERGILL

AUTHOR OF

'THE FIRST VIOLIN,' 'KITH AND KIN,' 'PROBATION,' 'FROM MOOR ISLES,' ETC. ETC.

IN ONE VOLUME.

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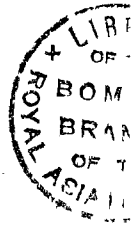

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A MARCH IN THE RANKS.

CHAPTER I.

ON DRESSMAKERS' DUMMIES.

'THERE! I think that looks well.'

Speaking very emphatically, Hilda Noble leaned as far back in the rocking-chair as it would go, and while with one hand she absently stuck a needle into the bosom of her gown, with the other she held out and in a satisfied manner turned about a dress bodice of black satin, adorned with lace and beads.

'Very well it looks,' her sister Lucy agreed with her, as she almost mechanically picked up pins and thrust them into the pincushion with her hands, while her eyes gazed fascinated upon the piece of finery which so pleased them both.

'And I know it fits,' pursued Hilda. 'What a comfort! My mind is now entirely free from all anxiety, and . . . . what time is it, Letty?'

'Six o'clock—exactly six.'

'Six? Godfrey should be here directly. He leaves his work at half-past five. Let me see! We dine at half-past seven, and I must do some work before I dress, this blessed night; and some more after I come back, too. How tired I shall be! As tea is coming in I think I will have a cup with you, to prepare me for my exertions.'

'I always observe that both before and after these magnificent spreads that you go to, you require some kind of nourishment over and above that which you are invited to go and eat,' said Letty, sarcastically.

Hilda laughed.

'Well, yes; I get so excited sometimes that I can't eat. I have known myself come home positively famished after a dinner of eleven courses. Therefore, Letty, if you don't sit up

have had the afternoon in which to do your work, and could have gone to bed at a reasonable hour.'

'Miss Shaw's things are awful; no one can help looking a frump in them,' said Hilda, shortly. '"Reefers," as she calls them, are her one idea of ornament for a dress bodice, and "cross-bands" for a skirt. Oh, heavens! Those "cross-bands." I wonder if she has ever opened her eyes to look upon the fashion of dress since she first shut herself into that stuffy little back parlour, and hung out a card from her front window with the delusive promise that "ladies' own materials" should be "reasonably and stylishly made up."'

Letty laughed. In this she was at one with her sister.

'Never mind,' pursued Hilda, as she seated herself at one corner of the table. '"'Tis but a little while." Soon I shall be so rich that I shall be able to go and order my things at Smithson's, regardless of expense; and, in the meantime, I would so much rather make them myself than give them to Miss Shaw.' (With profound contempt.)

Mrs. Noble smiled and shook her head, and the two sisters thereupon plunged into a conversation on the subject of dressmakers' dummies.

'They are so expensive,' said Letty.

'Oh, no, they are not. I saw a very nice one for fourteen shillings in that little shop in Stanton Road. The next fourteen shillings I have to spare is going to the purchase of three books that I want very badly. The one after that I will devote to buying the dummy in question.'

'I wish you would. It would be a great relief to me, I know,' sighed Letty.

'And to me as well. You get tired, I daresay, but I get nearly frantic when you stand on one leg just at the most critical moment in the arrangement of a drapery. A dummy won't do that.'

'Fancy the head mistress of the High School for Girls on her knees before a dressmaker's dummy, in her hours of relaxation, feverishly arranging draperies, or taking skirts up, or letting them down!' cried Letty, with a loud laugh. 'Oh, how I should like the Dean and Mrs. Dean, or Mrs. Farquharson, or Professor Leet, or any of the learned and majestic beings to come and catch you at it.'

Again Mrs. Noble smiled and shook her head, while Hilda laughed and contentedly sipped her tea, swaying backwards and forwards in her rocking-chair.

CHAPTER II.

A FAMILY HISTORY.

THE room in which the two girls and their mother sat was a commonplace room enough, exactly like hundreds of other rooms in hundreds of other houses of the same rent in the same town, and in the same kind of street; a front parlour—one of those rooms which their owners may call what they please, dining-room, drawing-room, or anything else, and which they may furnish as they please also, but which no name conferred, and no amount of taste or expenditure can make to appear anything but exactly what it is—the 'front parlour' of a small house in a row, the row in a street, the street in a town, and a dingy town at that. 'Front parlour' is stamped upon every line of it, and that the 'back parlour' is behind it is a no less self-evident fact.

The Nobles had not always lived in such a house, or in such surroundings. They all (except perhaps Letty) had recollections of very different doings—of a pleasant detached house in a large garden, away from the town; of a modest but sufficient staff of servants (now they had one). The mother in particular remembered the good days which now seemed so far back, as indeed they were—days when Letty had been a baby—when the father and the bread-winner had been still *living*, and her days had not been harassed, anxious, toilworn, not with the toil that brings profit, but with the barren, grinding kind, popularly known as the 'trying to make both ends meet.' She remembered well those days, and how light her heart had been. Then, the sudden, incomprehensible awful blank and blackness; the crash; the groping passage through a long, strange, terror-striking dream, the details of which, though hardly received into her consciousness at the time, she now remembered with the intensest clearness and accuracy; and how she had at last awakened from the dream. She remembered, so well, the very moment in which she had, as it were, come to herself and found herself one quiet afternoon, when *some* good friend had taken the children under her wing for a few hours, sitting alone in a room, in an armchair near a fire, and looking down at her hands, from which all the rings save one had been stripped, and which lay folded one over the other upon the crape drapery which flowed about her to the ground. Upon her fair brown hair lay a black crape cap, which, though not a heavy cap,

oppressed her, because she had never had a cap on at all before. Then and there, as the sunshine glinted in through the windows of the house they were soon to leave, it was borne in upon her mind—it came home to her—that she was a widow; that a widow's heart was beating under her crape bodice; that a widow's eyes they were which strayed round the well-known room; and that the dull ache which she had been enduring for three months, in the vague idea that it might pass away, would, on the contrary, never pass away, but would abide with her always. It was the feeling that widows had—women who had had good husbands and had lost them suddenly—a different kind of headache from any other in the world.

With this knowledge, which, as it were, opened the door and stepped in just then, entered also another guest, as it frequently does in cases like this: the capacity to endure and to stand alone through any kind of vicissitudes, in any gale or storm of fortune. Soft, gentle-nurtured creatures who have known no adversity, no publicity, no strain of any kind since the men they loved took them to their hearts and asked nothing better than to shelter them from every rough breeze—women of this kind will develop this capacity, and live on when all that made their best of life has been swept from their grasp. So Mrs. Noble lived on henceforth, for her children—not because there was sweetness in life for herself.

She smiled at her crape draperies. The mourning in her heart made them appear ridiculous; moreover, they would be very poor, and crape is expensive. She never had any more after the first widow's gowns that were got for her, but donned a black stuff working dress, and never, from that day, varied in her attire; two very simple black gowns, without trimming or ornament of any kind; one for the day and its work, the other to put on in the evening for a change, though no eye save her own could have discerned the difference between them. On Sundays, to go to church in, another black gown, a little better than these others. A black mantle, a black bonnet, black gloves, all of the simplest and plainest kind—these formed her wardrobe; and it is, perhaps, scarcely necessary to say that Mrs. Noble's gowns lasted her a long time. For many years this had been her unvarying attire. She had never had occasion for any other.

But lately a little change had taken place. Within the last few years she had had to go out sometimes. Godfrey had his career to make. Hilda had turned out rather brilliant, intellectually, at any rate, if in looks she fell short of actual

beauty. Evening parties, and an occasional dinner-party, had fallen in Mrs. Noble's way. Hilda had rooms of her own, entirely at her command, in the great school of which she was now the head-mistress, and, though she continued to live at home, she occasionally had official receptions, or assembled her private friends in these rooms, and on such occasions she considered her mother's presence indispensable. For these solemnities Mrs. Noble had gone to the extravagance of indulging in a plain rich black silk gown, and there her finery ended.

They numbered four in family: herself, her son—the eldest—and her two daughters. Mrs. Noble's income was a very small one; it scarcely amounted to two hundred a year, and it would die with her. The circumstances under which she enjoyed it at all were rather peculiar. Her husband, an educated but poor man, had held a responsible post in a very large business house in the city, near which they had lived. The principal of the firm, a very fair example of a merchant prince as they go now, had been deeply attached to him, and it had always been intended that at a certain time Mr. Noble should have some small share in the business whose interests he served so faithfully. Before the arrival of that time came his sudden death. After this event Mr. Warburton, the principal, with a long memory, and an accurate one, of the services of his late confidential clerk, had at first offered to pension the widow, but to this she would not consent. She would, she said, be thankful for his assistance, but to depend on his charity—no, she was sure *he* would not have approved of that. Her husband had left just a thousand pounds of savings. This must be invested to the greatest advantage, 'and if that is not enough,' said the widow, smiling from her fainting heart, 'I must work. Surely I can do something.'

Upon this, Mr. Warburton said she must give him the thousand pounds and he would use it in his business, and pay her a high interest for it. This was some salve to her oversensitive conscience. Two hundred pounds per annum as interest on a capital of one thousand, certainly is a very high percentage, and Mrs. Noble knew it perfectly well, but she thanked Mr. Warburton and took it. It was not, she often told herself, as if she gave nothing for it. There was that thousand pounds. It is very certain that little income saved her from having to live through a martyrdom, and it was a matter equally beyond dispute that if John Warburton was ever afflicted with sleepless nights they were not induced by

reflections upon his own harsh conduct towards the widow and the fatherless. Such instances are rare, but they exist. The merchant would have gone further and provided a berth for Godfrey in some branch of his business. But the obstacle to the carrying out of this proposition, when the time came for making it, was Godfrey himself. A doctor he must and would be—that, and nothing else. And London was the place where he was determined he would, if possible, take his degree. Though his mother represented to him that it would be absolutely indecent to refuse Mr. Warburton's offer, Godfrey seemed as if he meant to perpetrate that indecency, saying that only if there was nothing else for it would he go into the counting-house.

Mrs. Noble was nearly heart-broken about it.

'And he is *not* a selfish boy, Mr. Warburton,' as a rule,' she said, wringing her hands as she spoke of her son's unaccountable obduracy.

Mr. Warburton interviewed Godfrey, and afterwards informed his mother that he quite approved the decision; so much so that he was wishful to contribute something towards carrying it out, and that she really must try to make some sacrifice for that boy—he knew what he wanted, and it would pay to let him have his way. She was grateful, but still indignant with Godfrey's determination, using the very feminine argument that it was indeed shameful if what had been good enough for his father was not good enough for him. And again she repeated her assertion that he was not, as a rule, a selfish boy.

'No,' replied Mr. Warburton, with a queer, shrewd expression, 'I don't think he is a selfish boy. And it isn't a question of not being good enough—it's a question of suitability. As I have already remarked to you, I think you will find it pay to give him his way in this thing. I will contribute two-thirds of his expenses if you can find the rest. Then he will start in life equipped with the weapons which, he says, he has the greatest desire to wield.'

'You are too good. I think he might have made up his mind to try business. So much less expensive and troublesome,' she murmured.

'And so much less interesting and inspiring—for him. No, let us rather make of him a good surgeon than a bad merchant. And your daughters, Mrs. Noble? What are they doing?'

'My eldest daughter is studying hard for the university

local examinations, Mr. Warburton. She has brains. She resembles her father in that,' said the lady, with gentle pride. 'She will pass her examinations, take her certificate, and then, as I am assured, she may select her own situation.'

'Aha! Very good! Very well! And the other?'

'Ah—Letty is but a little girl yet.' The mother's lips began to quiver, and her eyes to fill. She was not ashamed of work, not she; nor afraid of it. But her little one—surely they needed not to plan out years of toil for her already. 'She has only just begun to go to school,' she added, in a trembling voice.

'Yes, yes, no need to talk about her. She'll do for a while,' Mr. Warburton said, quickly.

This rough man (he was in some quarters considered very rough) had wonderful tact in dealing with such a case. Mrs. Noble left his presence comforted, set up, with no false notions as to the life she was going to lead, no delusions on the subject of the destiny of herself or her children. This interview had taken place some years after her husband's death, when the question had arisen of Godfrey, and how he was to be disposed of.

Work was the lot that lay before them; hard work and plenty of it. This she understood, and did not fear it. She understood also that saving and pinching must be the order of the day in her little household; but that was easy to a woman of her temperament; that was easy, so long as there was the blessed knowledge that even if work were scarce and seasons of difficulty and darkness should come, still, there would always be something; the trifle in hand, and that secure of coming, and making what is to such as her the difference between happiness and misery.

Bravely, in her quiet way, she had gone about the task which lay before her, and which she, and many another of her stamp, understand so well: the close economy necessary to preserve an appearance of order and decency, to keep the house going, to provide clothing and education on a tiny stipend; to preserve in her children the habits of ladies and gentlemen; to make them keep all the observances of gentlefolk; and so to train them that while they eat cold meat and potatoes, or perhaps sometimes the potatoes without the cold meat, on two-thirds of the days of their lives, they should yet know enough of other things and conditions to ensure their committing no solecisms if they should ever find themselves in other scenes—at dinner-parties or social gatherings.

A poor, narrow, negative kind of life-work, many may say. Perhaps it is. It wants a determined character to go on with it year after year, through bad times and good times, against every disadvantage, and all the temptations poverty brings to drop down to a lower level than the remembered one of former days—the possible one of some dim, golden, future time. Mrs. Noble did it, and perhaps in the doing it came as near to being a saint and a heroine as some others who have made more noise in the world.

If Hilda had not had quite such a choice of situations, on first being ready to take one, as her mother had anticipated for her, still she had never been quite without work, though often it had been of a 'dree' kind. She had worked, indeed; worked incessantly; gone through her drudgery, taken her disappointments, told to none her secret hopes, ambitions, and sorrows. To a creature of her ardent, nervous eagerness of temperament, the self-repression must have cost a great expenditure of mental and moral force and nerve-tissue.

But, two years ago, when she had just passed her twenty-fourth birthday, a sudden change had arrived in her fortunes and prospects. A set of wealthy and influential men and women in the city, who interested themselves greatly in the spread of education amongst women—good middle-class education, as exemplified in that now popular institution, the High School for Girls, resolved that —— should have a High School if they could bring it about. Much money was expended, a committee was formed, and a head-mistress was sought. The person chiefly consulted on this matter was a certain Miss Barclay, the principal of a first-class ladies' college in which Hilda had for some time held a post as lecturer on different subjects. This lady, who had attained her high position by the exercise of her rare faculties of observation and discrimination, at once specified Miss Noble as being in her opinion better suited for the post than any one else with whom she was acquainted. The committee of influential persons had never heard of Miss Noble. Of course, Miss Noble herself was as much surprised as anybody when the news was broken to her of what was in contemplation; for the committee, acknowledging their own ignorance, were quite disposed to give Miss Barclay's highly eulogized *protégée* a trial.

And so it came to pass that all at once Hilda had found herself in a post of great responsibility, at the head of the new school, with what appeared to her an enormous income guaranteed to her, and certain capitation fees to augment it

when the number of pupils should have passed a certain point. The work, however, was hard, the responsibility tremendous, the duties onerous. It all made Hilda feel very grave, and did not tend to take away from the austerity (for it was no less than austerity) of the life she had hitherto led. But it suited her thoroughly. She looked forward to continuing in it until her working days were past, and her whole mind was given up to her work. Her position of course brought her into contact with many persons whom before she had only known by hearsay. It was discovered that Miss Noble was exceedingly clever—perfectly wonderful for her age. She must have given up her whole time to study, and not a bit pedantic with it. She was a great acquisition. Such was the nature of the verdict pronounced upon her. Invitations to entertainments of all kinds began to be frequent. Carriages and pairs were to be seen not seldom rattling through the dingy street, and up to the modest front door, much to the puzzlement of those neighbours with whom Mrs. Noble had never made up her mind to associate, or allow her children to associate, and much to the amusement of Hilda and Letty.

Mrs. Noble, though shaking her head a little at the late hours to which Hilda would often prolong both her work and her pleasure, now that she had them, was yet pleased with and proud of the new state of things, and was not surprised that, after so many years of pinching and denial, her girl should wish to enjoy the larger conditions when they were at last open to her. She did not marry, and Mrs. Noble heard of no lovers; though she had once or twice thought that one or two of Godfrey's friends, on the rare occasions on which he ever brought one home with him, had cast not indifferent looks on her tall pale daughter; but Hilda had never appeared even to see these friends of Godfrey's. Indeed, the Nobles' was a household in which there was never any talk of marriage; the only thing they ever talked about there, as a prospect, was work—getting something to do.

Mrs. Noble used to ponder this matter in her secret heart, and to wonder a little how it was.

'She is not exactly a beauty, but she is striking—different from other young ladies; and she has an expression, and eyes, and an air that many a beauty might envy,' said the mother to herself. 'I was not half as attractive, and long before I was twenty-four I had had three offers, and when I was two years younger than she is I was a wife with a devoted husband, and Godfrey was six months old . . . I think a new order of things

has come in,' Mrs. Noble decided within herself. 'Girls are different now. They have to be, I suppose. I really believe that numbers of them do not ever think of marriage. Their minds are fixed on other things. And perhaps it is just as well that it should be so.' the gentle lady concluded, 'for many of them would have to be very much disappointed if they thought so much about it as in my young days they used to do.'

Seeing that things had altered so much, and that Hilda had this great work—the very thought of which gave her mother a headache—and that she appeared perfectly satisfied with and absorbed in it, Mrs. Noble was glad, and in a mild, wondering way, proud of it all. Letty was a more backward girl, mentally, than at her age Hilda had been. She was still at school, working hard with a view to obtaining those credentials which her sister had carried off so easily, and with such high honours. Letty groaned over her labours; said she hated them; that she knew she should never pass; that she was not intellectual, and did not wish to be so; that she was not being educated, but crammed, and it was all horrid nonsense; but she ground away in spite of it all, and Hilda smiled at her fears of failure.

With her two daughters Mrs. Noble was, on the whole, well satisfied. With Hilda she was more than satisfied. The one thing about her children which had disappointed her was connected with Godfrey—her eldest child, her only son, and the one from whom she had expected the most in every way. Godfrey was nearly two years older than Hilda; he had insisted on going in for medicine, and his mother had made sacrifices in order to enable him to do so. He had worked hard, diligently, unceasingly; had passed his examinations and taken his diploma, but with it all he had, to use his mother's expression, 'come to nothing.' He had not succeeded in working up any private practice, and of course he had no money with which to buy that of any retiring doctor. He had filled different offices for different societies; secretary here, treasurer there. He had had subordinate posts in various hospitals. He had been this man's assistant for one time, and that man's *locum tenens* for another. And he kept himself—certainly he kept himself, his mother reflected. He caused her no expense, and, in a way, no anxiety. He was steady as old time, and gave no one any trouble. But she was not sure that she altogether approved—in a man—of that quietness and readiness to save trouble. It was surely more natural that they should require a fuss being made about them. He was his father's eldest child and only son, and she had expected so much from him. If he

had not been so determined, at the time when his future had had to be decided—if he had only gratefully accepted Mr. Warburton's offer of a post in his office, he would have been in a different position now, at nearly twenty-eight years of age, she reflected. Yes, if she had a cross in connection with any of her children, it was just in this respect—Godfrey, and his want of success, or of the determined and vigorous effort which ensures success; she knew not which it was.

She sat silent now, with thoughts something of this kind, till Hilda's voice again roused her.

'I shall have no time to do anything now, before I dress,' she said. 'It will have to wait till I come home. There's a committee meeting to-morrow, too. I shall have to be ready for them. I want all kinds of things, and I shall have to be very cautious how I ask for them. I must gild the pill very thickly.'

'Well, hurry off! You haven't too much time now,' said Letty. 'And if you want help with any of your arrangements call to me, and I'll come at once. I mistrust your scholastic brain in the matter of frills and bows.'

Hilda laughed, and rose to go upstairs, remarking something about 'the eccentricities of genius.' But at that moment there came to them a rattle of a latch-key in the front door.

'There's Godfrey!' said she. 'I'll wait a minute. I want to find out if he knows all about this evening. He must not be late.'

Directly afterwards the door was opened, a voice wished them all good evening, and Godfrey walked into the room.

He was a tall, slight young fellow, with a well-shaped head, frank eyes, and a mouth with a very determined expression, which was softened down with a slightly smiling look. He was different from both his sisters, different, too, from his mother, in looks, and yet the family likeness was present, and was strong.

'It is a great puzzle to me,' Mrs. Noble had said more than once to Hilda, 'the contradiction between your brother's looks and his character. To see him, any one would feel certain that he was full of life and "go," as you call it, my dear. He has so much the look that his father had when I first knew him. He has just the same mouth that his father had, so smiling and yet so strong-looking, and those bright eyes which look you straight in the face and seem to penetrate you through and through at the same time. And then, when it comes to action —the contradiction!'

'Are you sure there is such a contradiction, mother, in actual character? Don't you think it is more his looks and his manner than his looks and his character which disagree?'

Hilda always combated her mother's pessimistic views about Godfrey and his want of force of character.

'No, my dear. It is what I say, or he would have made more progress than he has done. You cannot say that your brother is very go-ahead. Those slang expressions which young people now use sound horrible, but they are occasionally very expressive.'

'Well, no, poor dear Godfrey. Whatever he may have in him, he has not so far done anything very brilliant,' Hilda was forced to admit. 'But I really do think he has never had his chance yet,' she would add, with a determination not to be harsh towards the brother who had been so much less successful than herself.

That was pretty much what they all felt about Godfrey—a good fellow, good as gold, but decidedly a little slow. Indeed, he was considered by many people to be quite a foil to his sister when they went out together, which they often did now, for a much more stupid young man than Godfrey Noble may be most useful as an escort to a brilliant sister.

'Here you are!' said Hilda to him, as he came in now. 'Are you also wishful for a cup of tea before we go forth to dine?'

'I'll have a cup of tea, please—yes,' said Godfrey, standing beside her on the hearthrug. 'Are you going to get ready?' he added, and then, with a slight, amused smile:

'What kind of an affair am I to have the honour of chaperoning you to-night, Hilda? Intellectual, æsthetic, free-thinking, or high art? I like to be somewhat prepared. It is hard on a fellow to have to be ready for anything, without a moment's warning.'

Letty chuckled. Hilda laughed and replied:

'Oh, I should say a mixture to-night. *Olla podrida.* It is sure to be amusing, anyhow. The Parkinsons' parties always are. Well, I am going to dress. The cab is to be here at a quarter-past seven, Godfrey, so be sure you are ready then.'

He nodded. Letty here brought him a cup of tea, which he received with gratitude. Hilda retired to her room, and in a short time her voice was heard, summoning Letty to her assistance. Nothing loth, the girl darted upstairs, shut herself up with Hilda, and a profound silence supervened in that quarter. By-and-by Godfrey also took his departure upstairs.

The tea-things had been removed. Mrs. Noble sat alone, and read a novel until at last, soon after seven, all her children came downstairs again, one after the other.

'Now, don't you call that gown a success?' asked Letty, with pardonable pride in a garment in the making of which she had afforded considerable help. 'No one can say, Hilda, that you "haven't much style on," as that queer American book has it.'

'Oh, my dear child!' remonstrated her mother, aghast.

'It's a fine expression, mother—a noble expression. I use it for all kinds of things now, and it seldom or never comes amiss. There is the cab, and here is Godfrey. You have your key, Godfrey, I hope, and if you are late we shall certainly not sit up for you. *We* shall have nothing exciting to keep us awake.'

With good-nights all round, the brother and sister departed to their evening's entertainment.

'There may be handsomer and richer people present at Mrs. Parkinson's dinner party than Godfrey and Hilda,' observed Letty, reflectively, 'but I am sure there will be none more intelligent; and I have been observing lately what different expressions people have who are intelligent from those who are just good-looking, and nothing else.'

'Don't get into the way of setting up intellect at the head of everything,' her mother chid her gravely. 'It is a great mistake, and leads to self-conceit and many other evil consequences.'

'Do you think it leads to as many evil consequences as stupidity leads to, mother?' said Letty, demurely. 'I don't think it gives as much trouble, at any rate.'

She got no reply to this heterodox question and reasoning, and with a chuckle which ended in a groan she sat down to the table, with a pile of books and a mass of loose sheets of paper before her.

'I do think it is a *shame* to make it compulsory on one to pass in arithmetic,' she said, gloomily. 'If you don't pass in that you don't pass in anything. How Hilda did it, I can't conceive. As if people's brains were all made alike. I shall never do it.'

Then she resumed her mighty wrestle with the never-ending bugbear of her present stage of existence—the arithmetic papers for the coming examination.

CHAPTER III.

HILDA IS SURPRISED.

GODFREY and Hilda had a drive of about fifteen minutes before them, to the house at which they were going to dine.

'You were rather late, Godfrey, this evening, weren't you?' asked his sister.

'Yes, I was. And I was just going to explain to you why, when you spoke. In the first place, I was bound to be at a meeting of the Hospital Board, to take the minutes. I'm their secretary, you know. It lasted rather longer than usual. After that I had an interview with a man with whom I have been in correspondence about something. I thought I would tell you first, before the mater and Letty.'

'What is it? Has some one left you a fortune? But, of course not, if it's something you have been corresponding about.'

'No. No one has left me a fortune. But I have actually got a post that I had been trying for—which is almost more miraculous,' said the young man.

'No! How delightful!' cried she, her eager mind at once picturing all kinds of glorious prospects. 'What is it? Something very good, I hope.'

Had she been looking at Godfrey she might have seen a queer little smile in his eyes and on his lips. But he replied, quite gravely:

'Oh, no! I don't feel sure that you will not think it a mere disgrace to be associated with a person in such a position. You know Askley Bridge, near Kirkfence—at least, you know where it is?'

'Yes—oh, yes! A place in one of the Dales. Very bracing. Isn't there——'

'A big hydropathic establishment there! you were about to ask. There is. There is also a small town about half a mile away, at the foot of a hill. That is where I am going—for a time, at any rate—to the establishment, I mean. The doctor there has fallen into ill-health. He's got leave of absence for six months, and is going to see what rest and travelling about can do for him. And I am going to fill his place for that space of time.'

'Godfrey! A doctor at a hydro! Why, I thought they were all quacks.'

'Then, my dear child, you thought quite wrongly,' he retorted, with a smile. 'Witness the living contradiction to such a theory now at your side.'

'Oh, that's one way of putting it. I really don't know whether I am pleased or not.'

'Well, I know very well that I am,' said Godfrey, not loudly, but emphatically. 'The screw is a good one, if it doesn't last very long, and——'

'A hydropathic place!' observed Hilda again, and he could hear from the tone of her voice that she turned up her nose. 'A place that all sorts of crotchety people go to, who think they have something the matter with them when they haven't, and where you spend the day in cold, wet sheets, and live on oatmeal porridge and mutton bones.'

'Exactly. You have described the place and the life there with your usual accurate impartiality,' he said, laughing. 'I knew you wouldn't like it, but I can't help that. We are not all in such lofty positions as you are.'

'Don't be spiteful!'

'I'm not, I assure you. I am merely stating facts.'

'And when do you go—if go you must?'

'Next week.'

'And live at the hydropathic place?' asked Hilda, with extreme distaste in her tones.

'Yes, live there, I believe.'

'Odious!'

'Wait till you have seen it, at all events.'

'Seen it, Godfrey? I am sure I shall never want to see such a place. And I shall never want to see you practising quackery.'

'I suppose you don't mean what you say, or understand that it amounts to an insult, Hilda. But never mind. You mean nothing wrong, and you will find out your mistake about me, at any rate.'

'I didn't mean to be rude to you, but I wish it had not been a hydropathic place. Somehow I always think of them as being humbug—them and everything connected with them.'

He made no answer, and they now drove up to the door of the house to which they were going. Godfrey helped his sister to alight, and in two minutes more they walked into the drawing-room, where the guests were nearly all assembled.

It was a large party, for a dinner-party. After greeting her host and hostess Hilda saw some one she knew, and began to talk to her. The people one met at that house were seldom of the mere society kind, with nothing but their looks and their

clothes to distinguish them. One did meet fashionable folks there, but they were generally something else as well as fashionable, and the inevitable pause before dinner was consequently not always the Slough of Despond that it often is. Hilda as usual forgot in eagerly discussing some topic that she was tired, and that earlier in the day her head had been aching. She and her companion were absorbed in the discussion of a projected girls' club in some part of the town. The friend was passionately in favour of its establishment. Hilda was somewhat against it, and was assigning her reasons for opposition with too much earnestness to notice Godfrey, or to look where he had gone; otherwise she might have seen him standing in conversation with a middle-aged, keen-eyed man, with a pale spare face, piercing eyes, grizzled hair and whiskers. Hilda did not notice them or any one else till a fan tapped her arm, and looking up she saw Mrs. Parkinson, her hostess, standing beside her, and looking at her with a slight smile. The keen-eyed man stood at the lady's elbow.

'Miss Noble, let me introduce Dr. Stonex to you. Dr. Stonex, will you take Miss Noble out when dinner's ready.'

Hilda and Dr. Stonex bowed to each other with much gravity. Mrs. Parkinson never slurred over names in making her introductions. Besides, Stonex was a name that every one in that neighbourhood well knew. Hilda felt secretly flattered that he had been told off for her, while privately hoping that he would lead the conversation, for she did not feel as if she should know exactly what to say to him.

'I have been talking to your brother,' the great physician had just begun, and seemed about to add something further when dinner was announced. He gave her his arm, and they said no more till they had taken their places.

'Talking to my brother?' Hilda began. 'Do you know him? Or does he know you, perhaps, I should say?'

'He is secretary to our branch of the *British Therapeutic*,' said Dr. Stonex. 'I've heard him read minutes, and seen his signature at the end of letters. I never spoke to him before.'

'Oh,' said Hilda, who had had now time to begin to feel herself a little nervous and to remind herself of sundry stories which she had heard of Dr. Stonex's sarcasm, of his ruthless dismissal of 'cases' which he did not regard as so serious as their happy owners wished him to think them, and, above all, of his brusqueness and taciturnity in society, to women and other frivolous human butterflies. Surely it was not more than ten days or so since a friend of hers had related to her how she had

been taken out to dinner by Dr. Stonex, and, trying to talk with him, had hoped to please by making tender inquiries about the house which he was building for himself somewhere in the country. She had asked him where, exactly, it was; to which he had replied grimly that he was building it for privacy, not publicity. The lady had angrily retorted that she was not thinking of offering herself as a visitor. Dr. Stonex was reported by her to have answered: 'No—shouldn't suppose you were;' and not another word had been exchanged between them. Hilda recollected all this, and wondered how she should fare. Within the last two years she had, she reflected, met a great variety of persons, but this was the first great gun, in the way of a physician, with whom she had made acquaintance, and he was formidable. Yes, she distinctly felt that he was formidable, and felt, highly strung and nervously sensitive as she was, that if she were ill and had to consult him, she would immediately lose possession of her seven senses, and would sit and stare at him.

'But, thank goodness, there's no danger of that,' she told herself.

The great man made no further remark till the soup had gone round and the conversation was pretty loud. Then he turned to her and said:

'Do you know, Miss Noble, that a year ago I was hardly aware of your existence?'

It was said so kindly, so genially, and with such a perfect manner that it went home to her exactly as if it had been a profession of friendship which carried truth and sincerity in every word.

'Have you known of it for so long as that?' she asked, her brilliant smile flashing over her face, as she laughed and looked at him. 'If you don't take an interest in my kind of work, I don't see why you should have known of my existence even an hour ago.'

'Ah, I see you mean that,' he replied, quietly. 'But I suppose you know as well as any one that, since you entered upon your present post, a good many people, hitherto ignorant, are very distinctly aware that there *is* a Miss Noble.'

'Oh, well, I suppose people who are interested in those things, and the parents whose children come to the High School, and who are sometimes good enough to give me their views on educational matters, must know. I don't know that it matters to the world at large, or that the world at large cares about it.'

'Very well. Take that view of the question, if you please to do so. I know all about it, and I am—no, I won't say I am one of the world at large, because I'm not. I have been anxious to meet you ever since I heard one or two things about you, which I need not specify. Perhaps you don't know that I asked Mrs. Parkinson to let me take you down?'

'No, I didn't,' said Hilda, in a queer, curt tone which she could use when she pleased, for she was not altogether satisfied with the remark, and she was not going to let the doctor suppose that she was overwhelmed by the honour he had done her. The colour rushed over her face, nevertheless, and then died away again.

He laughed quietly to himself.

'Don't you want to know why?' he demanded.

'Not particularly,' said Hilda, in the same abrupt way. She had a shrewd inkling that though she might wish to know why, ever so much, he would most likely not tell her. So, feeling irritated, she added:

'Unless you are going about collecting specimens for some future work.'

Again the doctor laughed, as if hugely diverted, and inquired blandly:

'Specimens of what?'

'Oh, of—well, that would depend upon your views on the "woman-question," as they call it; so, as I don't know them, I will not characterise the specimens.'

'Good! You have scored there,' he said, mildly.

Hilda could not help laughing a little. Then, all at once, her neighbour said:

'I was interrupted in my conversation with your brother. He is the best secretary we have had for a long time. I'm sorry to find we are going to lose him.'

'Yes,' she said, constrainedly, longing to ask so great an authority if Godfrey had told him on *what manner* of errand he was going away, and what was his opinion of it. But she felt as if to do so would be a little disloyal to Godfrey, and she refrained. He went on, however:

'He tells me he is going to the Moorside place at Askley Bridge.'

'Yes,' said Hilda, trenchantly, finding that he knew. 'He told me so, and I haven't got over it yet.'

'Indeed—why not?'

'I hate all those places.'

'Were you ever at one?'

'No, indeed.'

'Ever felt the need to go to one?'

'No, and I'm sure I never shall. No, thank you.' [To the waiter, who had offered her a dish.]

'Refusing the roast, Miss Noble? Don't be too sure that you "never shall," as you say.'

'Why, do you approve of them?'

'Ah, that's a wide question. If you had asked me whether I approve of your brother, now!'

'I think Godfrey——'

'You think Godfrey—what?'

'I don't like it for him. He is very clever, though——'

'Though you mightn't think it. Was that what you were going to say? You need not tell me that. He is clever. My five minutes' conversation with him told me that.'

'Did it? I am so glad,' exclaimed Hilda, her whole face abeam with pleasure.

A contented expression came into her eyes and over her mouth. Dr. Stonex, apparently quite absorbed in doing full justice to the 'roast,' which Hilda had refused, did not miss or fail to note any single expression on her part. His tone, when next he spoke, was distinctly more urbane, like a sudden change in the wind from east to south.

'Yes. Pray don't trouble your head about Moorside being *infra dig.* and all that, which I suppose is what you have been thinking. Let Godfrey alone, for I can tell you, young lady, that you need never fear his doing not only what is right, but that which is best to be done.'

'Do you think so?' she asked, almost awe-struck, as she looked up at him, and saw the keenness of his eye and lip all softened, and the bland expression on his face.

'I don't think anything about it. I know it,' he answered. After which he dropped the personal tone and began to talk about other things, making himself so delightful that the dinner, which Hilda had half-feared might be spoilt for her by reason of his too great sharpness and severity, developed into one of the pleasantest 'opportunities' she had ever enjoyed.

Dr. Stonex was a travelled and a highly cultivated man; he had, moreover, an intimate acquaintance with women of every variety, age, and station. Besides, he was a genius in his line, and he enchanted the enthusiastic Hilda. He talked so much himself that she did not in the least know she was being drawn out, nor realise how searching were the few questions he put to her. She did not find out that she had given him

practically a *résumé* of her whole life—a list of her struggles, disappointments, and successes—and had incidentally revealed a good deal of her own nature and character to him at the same time. Of course she did not know it. *Ars est celare artem.* It was the business of Dr. Stonex, and his daily practice, to find out about people a great deal more than they imagined they were telling him. It had been his practice for the last five-and-twenty years to do so, and it would have been strange indeed if by this time he had not been a past master in the process.

In the drawing-room once more, when dinner was over, Hilda was very quiet, thinking over much that they had talked about. The men at that house never sat long over their wine; in a short time they also returned to the drawing-room. One or two whom Hilda knew spoke to her, and she answered them absently. She was at last sitting quite alone, and was extremely pleased when she found her neighbour at the dinner-table again at her side. The room was one of a series opening one out of the other, each one containing several pleasant nooks and recesses, with window-seats or couches in a kind of alcove, and, although the talk and laughter of the others were going on all round them, they were practically alone.

'Miss Noble,' said he, and he spoke in a different tone from any which he had yet employed—gravely, kindly, as such a man may speak to a woman, young or old—'may I for a few minutes talk a little "shop" to you, without fear of incurring your displeasure?'

'Surely, Dr. Stonex! What do you mean?'

'Only this. I have been much interested in our conversation this evening, and in what you have told me about yourself.' (Hilda looked at him in amazement, and he, though secretly much diverted, did not even smile.) 'I am an old hand at diagnosing character as well as cases as you may suppose, and—you will pardon me—I diagnosed yours to-night.'

'Well,' she asked, with a rather nervous laugh. 'Did you find anything very bad?'

'Yes, very,' he said, with an indulgent smile. 'I found a tendency to go on and on in the same groove without rest or relaxation, and a morbid sensibility of nerves—at least a sensibility which might easily become morbid. You are *living* beyond your income, if you know what I mean. You are drawing on your capital, and contracting debts which—well' (as he saw her look of horrified alarm), 'I don't want to be a bugbear, but if you'll take my advice you will not lose too

much time in going to pay your brother a visit at that place which you dislike so much without having seen it. It would do you a world of good.'

'Oh, but when I have my holiday, I——'

'Yes, you told me. You go to the same place with the same people, because you like the place and its people. It is folly, though an amiable kind of folly. Take a complete change next time, and in advance of that take my advice, and if things—business, you know, or so forth—should be tiresome and "contrary," as so many of you ladies call it, say to yourself as I should, "To the deuce with it! What do I care?" Remember, that there is nothing in the world—*nothing*—worth fretting yourself ill about, and that if once the nerves give way you cannot have the faintest idea when or if ever they will recover their balance. That is what our modern researches have taught us. That is what we learn from America, where they have a superfluity of nerves, and——'

'But, indeed, I am not thinking of being ill,' she said laughing. 'You are very kind, but——'

'Remember,' he went on, paying no attention to her interruption, 'you are starting—or rather you have been for some time travelling—on a road which women may take to more frequently in the future, but there are not so many on it now, and our experience is that, with some few exceptions, they are not the best fitted to go along it. In fact, to put it shortly, take care! Don't overwork yourself, and don't worry about anything in the world. It isn't worth it.'

'Your carriage, sir,' said a servant, coming to him.

'Thank you, I must go at once,' he said, turning to Hilda, with the smile which he knew how to make very fascinating. 'Good-night. Now, do not forget what I have said. I am very glad to have made your acquaintance, and I shall watch your course with interest.'

'Thank you—good-night,' said Hilda, disjointedly, as she laid her hand within the one he extended to her. And then he was gone. She saw him take a rapid adieu of their hostess, and then go quickly away, as if he were in a hurry. She was not sorry when Godfrey came to her, saying with a smile:

'Our "carriage" is here, too, Hilda. Are you ready to go?'

'Quite,' she replied; and they also took their departure.

In the doctor's carriage was his wife. This lady, as all the world knew, had occupations and pursuits of her own. She and her husband were frequently asked out separately; for she did not care for general society, and he did. This evening she

had been presiding over a meeting of poor girls, as president of a society for their advancement and protection. It had been agreed that she should call for him soon after ten; hence his immediate departure when his carriage was announced.

'Well, and how did you like your Miss Noble, dear?' she asked him, as they were being driven home.

'Very well—very well, indeed—though I'm sorry for her.'

'Are you! Why?'

'She's one of a type which is becoming more common now than it used to be. She has brains and ambition, which would be all very well if there were nothing to be a drag upon them. But she is a woman—there all is said. You know my views, Marian, on that question. She has all your sex's sensitiveness and receptivity—nerves that vibrate strongly to the slightest touch, and not the physique to stand the wear and tear and worry of life. Such organisations may be happy, and may go on blooming brilliantly enough if their circumstances are easy. But hers are not. I gathered from her ingenuous remarks that she has had an uphill fight all the time, aud that this was the first gleam of real brightness and prosperity which had come to her. With five hundred a year safe, a woman like that may lead a happy and healthy life. With "nothing a year, and find yourself," as old Blower used to say, she is bound to go through prolonged suffering of one sort or another. And of course she hasn't the faintest idea of saving up her resources; takes everything—both pleasures and pains—*au grand sérieux*, as if each event were the event of her life. Such people as that never learn from anything but experience—sometimes not from that. Yes, she is a fine girl, and I am sorry for her.'

His wife was silent. She was accustomed to hear his views on these matters, and his next remark did not surprise her. In fact, she expected it.

'A comfortable marriage, with not too much feeling on either side—that's the best lot you can hope for her,' he said.

'Oh, Richard, you do so distress me with that cold-blooded doctrine of yours.'

'The best lot you can hope for her,' he repeated, emphatically.

Again Mrs. Stonex made no reply aloud, but within herself she was saying that she had known even Richard to be at fault sometimes in both his diagnosis and his treatment of a case. She knew better, however, than to remind him of such a thing. After a pause, he again said:

'I liked the girl, as I say; but, Marian, she had a brother with her—a brother named Godfrey.'

'Oh!' said Mrs. Stonex, quickly.

'Yes. He is a year or two older than herself, I gathered. Our Godfrey would have been about her age now. This young man I liked extremely. He has not the brilliance of his sister, but—I could fancy our boy might have been not unlike him.'

'Do you think so?' said his wife, in a low voice; and neither of them spoke again till they alighted at their own door. Thirteen years ago, their one child had died of malignant scarlet fever, and since then theirs had been a childless home.

CHAPTER IV.

AT HOME.

MEANWHILE Godfrey and Hilda were jogging homewards in their cab, and discussing the events of the evening as they went.

'I liked Dr. Stonex, Godfrey. Did you?'

'I've liked him for a long time.'

'But he told me he had never spoken to you before to-night.'

'He told you quite true. But I have not been doing secretary to the *British Therapeutic* for more than a year, and seen him at meetings, and heard him make speeches, and gone on reading his books, without ever forming an opinion of him. He is a splendid fellow. He's a man, is Stonex.'

'Yes. And he thinks you are the same,' said Hilda, demurely.

'Me? What do you mean?'

'Oh, he talked to me about you. I shall not tell you what he said, for fear of puffing up your natural vanity beyond all bounds. There would scarcely be room for both of us in this cab if I told you all that he said. I quite fell in love with him, simply on account of his good opinion of you.'

'I am overwhelmed. What did you find to talk to him about all that time? I saw he was with you again after dinner.'

'He gave me medical advice—gratuitously. Godfrey, what is he? Nerves and brain, or fevers, or gout, or dyspepsia, or what? I am ashamed to think that I really don't know.'

'He's a first-rate all-round man. Not half as dangerous as a specialist, Hilda, so you need not be afraid of following his

advice. I wonder if the mater will still be up when we get home? If she is, I shall tell her about Askley Bridge.'

'I don't think she will. Dr. Stonex knew you were going to Askley Bridge, and he seemed to think it was all right,' said Hilda, on whom the doctor's opinion as to Godfrey, and his capacity for doing what was best, had made a deep impression. So often do we form opinions from the outside about things and persons whom we ought to know better than any outsider can know them. Perhaps this may imply another truth—that our proximity to those we love, and to whom we are closely related, by no means adds to our power of rightly reading them and their characters.

Mrs. Noble had, as Hilda surmised, gone to bed. So had Letty. Every one in that early household had gone to bed when the brother and sister entered the house. They both had work to do. Letty's prophecy was fulfilled. Hilda's first move was to the sideboard, on which a considerate family had left a provision of bread and butter, and little jug of milk. Having regaled on these, and expressed surprise at Godfrey's refusal to partake of them, she produced her writing materials, and he his, and for more than an hour they were both silent, one at each side of the table, writing busily, and only now and then pausing to consult a book or a paper. Godfrey smoked a pipe as he worked. Hilda, needless to say, did not, though she looked up once and wondered why she should not keep him company. He obligingly offered to provide her with the means of doing so. She shook her head and said:

'I wonder what my history class—sixth form—would say, if I appeared to give my lecture to-morrow, dispersing an odour of tobacco as I walked!'

When Hilda at last gathered her papers together, and looked at the clock, the hands pointed to five minutes before twelve, and her face looked pale and her eyes looked tired. Godfrey looked at her. In him were visible no signs whatever of fatigue. The same undisturbed expression, firm lips, straightforward eyes, and no more appearance of being weary or jaded than when he had come down to breakfast in the morning.

'That's done!' she exclaimed, with a mighty sigh. 'My lecture for to-morrow. It is the most difficult one in some ways that I have had yet. But I think it will turn out a good one. Good-night, Godfrey; I'm nearly dead.'

'You look very tired, Hilda. It would have been better not to have gone to the dinner-party, but——'

'Oh, don't preach, dear old Sobersides,' said she, lightly, as

she stopped and kissed his cheek, smiling. 'I cannot resist these invitations when they come. One must live, Godfrey, when one has a chance.'

'I know you have not had much chance heretofore,' he said, gently, 'but you may go too fast, my child.'

'Just what Dr. Stonex said. But I am not afraid. Good-night, again.'

Gathering her pretty skirts over her arm, and her papers under it, she went away. Godfrey was left alone to smoke a final pipe. He lay back, dreaming, in the great rocking-chair by the fireplace.

'I wonder if my chance has come at last!' he said within himself. 'I've waited for it long enough. It ought to amount to something this time, for it never has done before. If it is anything, I'll take hold of it. I wonder what the mother will say to it, though. She won't like it. She will revert to the glories which might have played about a high stool in Warburton's office. Well—she always will—the dear mother! I cannot help it.'

It was half-past twelve when he put out the light, and went softly upstairs. There was quiet in the house and in the street for a few hours. Hilda's tired white face, Letty's rosy fresh cheek, both lay very quiet and still on the pillows of their respective little white beds. And gentle Mrs. Noble, too, who had said her prayers that night with a feeling of unusual thankfulness, slept quietly until the first rumbling wheels of the heavy market carts, which came in from the country that way, opened the roar and rattle which scarcely ceased for ten minutes during the next eighteen hours.

Before Godfrey had departed for his work at nine o'clock, befor eHilda had made her usual pretence of a breakfast in the shape of a piece of dry toast and a cup of tea, as a solid foundation for the day's labours, the household had been made acquainted with Godfrey's new prospects, and had one and all candidly expressed their opinions thereupon. Mrs. Noble, knowing little about the relative degrees of distinction in the profession, was only sorry that the appointment was not a permanent one. Six months, she thought, was such a short time for which to root yourself out of your fixed and established ways and habits. She wished there had been any prospect of its being a permanency. To which Godfrey said nothing. He felt as if no words would ever make his mother understand or approve.

Hilda, with the words of Dr. Stonex still vividly in her

recollection, refrained from saying anything, except that she supposed Godfrey knew what he was about. Letty's lively imagination at once seized upon the situation. She mentally beheld her brother superintending the 'packing' or starving of his patients, administering to them continuous and copious doses of cold water at all hours of the day and night; and, in fact, many other remarkable scenes arose before her mind's eye, all of which she depicted to them with much derisive merriment, and begged Godfrey, if he should have any influence at his place, to exert it before he left, in order to enable her to have a view of the routine pursued there.

'Really, Letty,' said Hilda, 'how can you wish to go to any such place, or to see any such things?'

'I should like it, of all things,' Letty affirmed. 'I think it would be "*pur*fectly splendid," as that American book says. I should have nothing the matter with me, you know, and I should watch them all going about in their wet sheets, with their glasses of cold water, drinking each other's healths, and saying, "Good-morning, how do you do? Oh! ugh! Were you ever so cold in your life? Ah!"'

Godfrey exploded into a prolonged fit of laughter, and said that when, or if ever he should feel ill, and find it necessary to go in for treatment at such a place, he would certainly avoid the one patronised by his sister Letty.

'He's going as a reformer,' said Letty, upon this. 'He will have things quite different—he will try hot water instead of cold, and will scald it out of them. An entire revolution will take place. Oh!' in a keener, shriller voice, as he rose, 'Godfrey, dear Godfrey, don't go till you have shown me how to do these sums. I wrestled with them last night till I was almost mad. I should have been, quite, only I fell asleep in my chair, from sheer exhaustion, and so my reason—such as it is—was preserved. I shall never pass. *Never!* I know it.'

'Bring your Colenso here,' he bade her, and she flew to get it, slapping the back of it viciously as she returned with it in her hand.

For half an hour they both wrestled mightily with some of the brain-disturbing problems in double proportion, and, when it was over, Letty put her elbows on the table, rested her head on her hands, and groaned.

'Well, do you see it now?' he asked her, with provoking equanimity of look and tone.

'Yes, thank you, Godfrey, I believe I see it now. I think so. But this kind of thing makes an old woman of me.

Which great general was it who said, after one of his battles, that another victory like that would be worse than a defeat? This is exactly what I feel about those hideous sums. But I am much obliged to you, all the same.'

In a few minutes after that they had all gone out, and Mrs. Noble was left to her quiet morning of domestic management and household arrangements.

CHAPTER V.

THE EVE OF DEPARTURE.

GODFREY had told his sister he was to go to Askley Bridge next week; and he accordingly set about making his preparations for departure. This he was allowed to do undeterred and uninterrupted. Whatever was the young man's own feelings in the question—and it is to be presumed that he had some feelings—none of his family teased him with needless inquiries or suggestions or recommendations as to any one thing connected with his new departure. Mrs. Noble—good and gentle soul—when she came to think things over, felt that she had not much confidence in it. It was just another of Godfrey's tentative, profitless undertakings; he was always trying things and never keeping them. It would end in his coming home at the end of six months ('or of six weeks, perhaps, how do I know?' she said to herself), with absolutely no remunerative employment, and living upon his slender stock of ready money till what time he should find something else, equally transitory, equally worthless. 'A permanency' was what this lady's mind was fixed on, and what her soul craved. He had thrown away the permanency which had been open to him years ago, which would have been such a stand-by, and such an added dignity to herself and to the family now. And he had not made up for it by securing any other permanency. It did seem so strange that with all his friends in town—they existed in her own imagination, Godfrey never boasted of his friends—and with all his devotion to his profession, he could never find a permanency, be the same an independent practice, or a salaried post of any kind. With these feelings in her mind, Mrs. Noble judged that her kindest course was to say nothing to her son—and she said it.

Hilda was for a day or two respectfully silent, remembering

Dr. Stonex's remarks, not reconciled in her heart, but subdued. At the end of those few days she was so absorbed, heart and soul, in the work belonging to her position, that she had almost forgotten about Godfrey. She had committee meetings to attend, reports of different matters to make out, and entertainments to go to. She almost lived at the school, and from nine in the morning till ten at night her family scarcely saw her. The governing body of the High School had wished to secure a principal who would be zealous, and would take an interest in the new methods of teaching; one who would also have some interest in general outside questions; not only in that of education of girls, but in education generally. Truly they had found what they went out for to seek. With the energy and eagerness which were part of her very nature, and which had been so long repressed, curbed, and held in bondage by the pitilessly narrow circumstances in which she had lived, Hilda flung herself into the whirlpool which is always ready to swallow up such as she—the maelström of endless meetings on business or enterprise; of collecting the materials for an efficient staff of subordinates, who should work together at once intelligently and harmoniously; and, in addition to that, of pushing forward her own studies, and ever keeping ahead of the rest in her own particular branches.

Socially, she became vastly popular all at once. If any strain came with all this sudden access of work and engagements, it was not visible—it was quite swamped in the bustle and excitement of the new life, which had now been going on for some two years, but which got no quieter, no less crowded, for the school had become as popular as its head-mistress. It had opened with fifty pupils; it now had two hundred and fifty, and there was work to correspond with the increased numbers.

Letty participated in the interests and the pleasures which this life brought to her mother and sister. Amongst them, Godfrey was left very free to follow his own pursuits and devices.

'Godfrey,' said Hilda to him one evening, when he had come in and they were sitting down to dinner—when she, for a wonder, was not partaking of some nondescript meal at the school—'I hope you are not engaged to-morrow night. Mrs. Makepeace has sent me tickets for the conversazione at the picture gallery, and I think it will be good.'

'By this time to-morrow night I shall be at Askley Bridge, unless something uncommon should happen to prevent it. I go by the 1.50, in the afternoon.'

'Gone! By to-morrow!' ejaculated Hilda, perfectly aghast. 'Why, you said you weren't going for a week.'

'It will be one day more than a week, to-morrow, since I said so.'

'I *never* knew anything so extraordinary! Gone! How I shall miss you. Why do you go to this horrid place, Godfrey? I am sure if you had stayed here a little longer, and waited, something good would have come.'

'I'm not going because I thought nothing good would ever come here.'

'Then why go at all?'

'Oh, you would probably disagree with my reasons if I gave you them, so let us never mind about it. I am sorry I can't go with you to the conversazione. What will you do?'

'Go with Mrs. Makepeace, I daresay. She asked me to dine there and go with them, but I said I would get you to take me. I wished her to see that I had a man of my own, and a very nice man,' said Hilda, her quick tact telling her that perhaps her brother's feelings might have been hurt by her seeming neglect of him.

He smiled.

'You will always find an escort, I am sure. Are you off somewhere to-night, too?'

'Yes. There's a party at the Alisons. But I shall see you to-morrow morning, of course, before I go out.'

'Yes, certainly. Much pleasure to you,' he said kindly to her, as he opened the door for her to go out of the room.

Alone in her room, Hilda frowned with vexation at her own carelessness.

'How odious of me to forget. What must he think? Ah, there's my cab.'

In five minutes she was gone.

CHAPTER VI.

LETTY EXPLAINS HER VIEWS.

LATER in the same evening Godfrey was in his own room, with things strewn around him, and a large portmanteau open on the floor before him. He heard a tap at the door, and in answer to his 'Come in,' Letty presented herself.

'Godfrey,' she began, twisting herself uncomfortably about,

and going first red and then pale, and then red again, 'I wondered if I could help you with your packing. I—you know, I was quite as much surprised as Hilda to hear that you were going away to-morrow. We get so absorbed in what is going on that we forget what does not just concern ourselves. I'm very sorry you are going.'

Godfrey had no need of any help in his packing. His worldly goods were very few, his habits exceeding simple and extremely independent—from necessity, whether from choice or not. He was quite capable of stowing away his belongings to the best advantage. Letty would be distinctly more of a hindrance than a help. But he looked at her with those bright, smiling eyes, which never had in them any expression of dissatisfaction or gloom, and said, promptly:

'Thank you, Letty. You are most amiable. I'm just ready for those instrument cases. Give them to me—those on the dressing-table.'

'How horribly depressing to have to travel about and keep such things by you,' said Letty; and, inspired by uncontrollable curiosity, she opened the case.

'Wah! What grisly-looking things! Godfrey, what are those for?'

'For cutting off your arm or your leg, my sweet child, if it should ever happen to be necessary. They're amputation knives.'

'And can you use them?'

'Certainly—if necessary—as I said before.'

'Have you ever used them?' she persisted, earnestly.

'Don't go too much into detail,' he said, laughing, as Letty stood over him, watching with intense interest while he made a place for the amputation knives. Help him with his packing! Yea, verily!

'You needn't open the others,' he remarked, drily. 'You wouldn't know what they were.' And then, to the great delay of his proceedings, he got her to hand him first one thing and then another, till at last he declared he had done all he intended to do that night. Letty then sat down on the lid of the portmanteau, and blurted out:

'Didn't you think us a lot of brutes to have forgotten when you were going away?'

'No, Letty, I didn't. I change my plans pretty often. The mater does not much approve of my going. She had not forgotten, though she said nothing. And I have observed that for the last week Hilda has not had a blessed moment to call

her own. She's going too fast, is that young woman. Couldn't you put the drag on sometimes?'

'*I* put the drag on? As if she would notice anything that I said!' cried Letty.

'Well, throw cold water on these constant engagements, when you can. She is not one of the sort that can stand that kind of thing. With the work she does, she ought to lead a quiet regular life at home, with an occasional evening out. And if she were in bed at ten o'clock every night of her life, so much the better for her.'

'She never will,' said Letty, very decidedly. 'It's perfectly useless to expect it. And indeed I don't see how you can.'

'No,' he admitted. 'It is natural—perfectly natural. She may be stronger than I think, too; I hope she is.'

'I don't know what I shall do about those sums when you have gone,' said Letty, gloomily, reverting to her own affairs.

'Oh, send me some now and then, and I'll give you what help I'm able to,' said Godfrey, trying to console her. 'They are really very simple.'

'Perhaps—when you once understand the reason of them; but I don't, and never shall. Oh, Godfrey, how I do loathe and detest the higher education of women; and everything of that kind. I don't want to be a higher educated woman; I am not suited for higher education. And I don't see the good of it for me. I don't see that you learn anything useful by it either. What good is that arithmetic ever going to do me? I was reading in a book the other day that education ought to be such a delight to the young mind, which should be led on insensibly from one goal to another; oh, I can't remember it all. It was all about a flower-strewed path, and looking back from one sunny ascent to the one we had just left, and forward to the next bright peak, and so on.

'Now, I ask you,' Letty said, dramatically, 'how many flowers strew *our* path, with those awful examiners looming in the distance, and the horrible feeling that you *must* have your paper ready in twenty minutes, or fail. You know you could do it if you had time, and you know you can't do it because you *must*,' she continued, incoherently and excitedly. 'And the examiners themselves are so busy that they haven't time to look at the papers properly or discriminate between the good and the bad. Professor Dupin, last time, was perfectly furious because two girls, who

he said he knew ought to have had first-class honours, came out only just through. And then, when you have got through it—if you by any chance do get through it—you have no time to think about it, or pursue it, or improve upon what you have learnt. There's another great "group" hanging over you like a nightmare. I have no pleasure left in my life since I began to go in for examinations.'

'What does this portend?' asked Godfrey. 'Do you want me to do something for you?'

'I want you to tell mother how I hate it, and ask her to let me give it up. I know I should learn twice as much with my mind free. It isn't that I hate learning, Godfrey. You said I did that botany very well that you taught me. It is being driven to things, and knowing that you must have them ready by a certain time, that kills me, and paralyses me. It does indeed.'

'But, Letty,' said he, as he stood in front of her, and looked down at her, 'there is the future. You know you will have to work like the rest of us: and in these days competitive examinations, and the ability to pass them, form the test of suitability for nearly everything. It is a bad plan, in my opinion, but we are not the people who make the plans, and if we want to get on we have to conform to them.'

Letty was silent, her handsome flushed face looking downcast, a slight quiver on her pouting lip, and her foot tapping the floor. What a handsome lass she was, thought Godfrey; full, too, of life and energy, with twice the physique of her sister. She would not be pale, and slender as a reed, at six-and-twenty. He felt sorry for her, and came and sat down beside her, laying his hand gently upon hers. Letty's foot still worked about. Deep breaths agitated her bosom, and at last she burst forth, with a kind of strangled sob:

'Godfrey, I don't want to be a governess in any way or shape. I don't want to "teach in a family," as they call it. And, above all, I don't want to be a colleague.'

'A what!' he asked, bewildered.

'A colleague. You know, these High School marms' (Godfrey repressed a laugh), 'and heads of colleges, and all that, always talk about their "colleagues." Oh, no, Hilda has a "staff"—it's her staff, as if she were a general commanding-in-chief—which I suppose she is, in a way. But long before she had any staff we used to laugh about her colleagues, and we do yet. "Colleagues" are people who teach in colleges and high schools. And I hate them all,' said Letty, passionately. 'They always

lress like frights, and you may know one of them a mile off, simply because of the awful things she has on. But it isn't only that. There's no law to make you wear the sort of clothes they wear—flop,pinesses and dirty green and yellow things, and gowns with no waists at all—unless they agree to boycott every one who doesn't, and they are quite capable of it. I need not dress like that, I suppose, even if I were a colleague. I would go in for tailor-made gowns and a small waist, on purpose to outrage their feelings. It is the life altogether—the teaching, and everything about it. Indeed, I would far rather keep a fruit and vegetable shop, or scrub floors, or sell Berlin wools and beads. I can understand that. I'm not lazy. I don't care how hard I work, but I don't want to do that. And I want you to tell mother. Must I tell you my ideal life, Godfrey—the one that I am sure I was born for?'

'Pray do!'

'A house in the country—to manage it. A house with an orchard and a garden, with cows and pigs, and cocks and hens. But a garden is necessary above all. A house where they have country ways, and where the mistress goes into the kitchen and looks after the maids, and knows all about cheese and butter-making; a neighbourhood where there's a carrier's cart and no trams or omnibuses, and no railway station within miles, and where people are neighbourly. That's my idea of life. I would not mind being a servant in such a house as that. But these examinations and "colleagues," who know everything and are so disagreeable with it that you feel how much better it would be to know nothing—these town ways and the dirt and the crampedness—a mile to walk if you want to see a few green trees and a bit of dirty grass—it is an abomination to me.'

'What an outburst! I had no idea you were in such a state of perturbation.'

'I knew you had not. I've kept very quiet about it, but I've thought the more. And I've come to the conclusion that all this coaching and stuff is money thrown away on me. My heart is not in it; I can't put it into it. Will you tell mother?'

'Why not tell her yourself?'

'Because she would cry and say I was wrong-headed, and I could not bear that. Besides, she would not think my opinion of any value at all. It is not want of courage. Only she would think nothing of my opinion, but a great deal of yours.'

'Not much, I'm afraid,' said he, with sudden gravity. 'But look you, Letty, promise me this. Work away for the present

at what you are doing just as hard as if you meant to go in for your exam. I'll think it over and see what can be done, and in the meantime do you try to think that it does not much matter whether you pass or not, so long as you do your best. See? If you can once drive that into your poor little head, the battle is more than half won.'

'And you will really think about it?'

'I will most certainly think about it.'

'Then I promise, Godfrey,' said Letty, a look on her lips as resolute as his own. 'And as you are going into the country you might look out, and if you were to see——'

'You are going nowhere yet,' he interrupted her, decisively.

'Why not? I'm turned seventeen. Girls go out to service long before that. They call them slaveys. They begin as slaveys and end as charwomen. I'm not going to be a highly finished article like you and Hilda. I shall earn little, and have to go on earning much longer, as well as to begin it much sooner. Yes, if you find a nice farmhouse, where they want the children taught, and are not particular about a certificate' (with vicious emphasis), 'let me know of it.'

'I tell you candidly that I shall not say anything to my mother before I go away.'

'Very well,' said Letty, in a tone of entire contentment. 'That is all right. I know you will do what is best.'

'It is a great pity, child,' he said, musingly. 'Hilda could have done so much for you, in her present position.'

'Yes, I know,' said Letty, deprecatingly, 'but colleaguism is a round hole, and I am a square girl, and that's a fact.'

'I daresay you are right,' replied Godfrey. 'I have myself suffered from trying to fit myself into wrongly shaped holes. Perhaps we shall all find the very places to suit us, sooner or later; Hilda has stepped into hers already.'

'Yes. No one ever found a place so satisfactory to them in every way as Hilda, when they made her the head-mistress of that school. Perhaps you may have had a similar experience, Godfrey, at this place you are going to.'

'Not very likely,' said he; 'I took the appointment on the express understanding that I was to hold it for six months and no more, because the pay is good. I don't want to settle down into a country practice.'

'Why, don't you think it good enough?'

'That is not my view of any branch of my profession,' said he, smiling slightly, but in a way which made Letty feel small. 'It is because I don't feel inclined for it. I think it is difficult

to keep your hands so free, and your head so clear of prejudice, and, above all, to keep in the van of the movement, as it were, in the country, as in the town. I must confess that I like a town life,' added Godfrey, with a laugh. 'Part of the modern disease of loving to live in a crowd, and nourish oneself on excitement, I suppose. But I do love it. I might exist in the country, but I shouldn't be happy there.'

'How, how different from me!' cried Letty, with some excitement. 'I exist in the town, though I hate it, but in the country, which you think so dull, I should be perfectly happy—*perfectly* happy,' she repeated, in a kind of rapture. 'If ever it should be my fate really to earn my living as a "colleague" of some kind, I shall try for some place in the country. I'll tell you what I could do,' she added, impressively. 'I have often thought of it, and I would far rather do it, too, than teach in one of these town places. I could be a certificated village schoolmistress in the country, somewhere. In the intervals of my duties as instructress to the village youth I should keep bees and cultivate a garden. I should have a dog, of course, both for company and as a guardian.'

'Yes, my poor child, and it would most likely be all the company you would get. Village schoolmistresses are not in the swim, so far as society is concerned, however much they may deserve to be so.'

'Don't interrupt me. I am not thinking of society, but of what I should like for myself. I should save up my money, and by selling the produce of my garden and my hives——'

'To all the other people, who would also have gardens and hives, thus causing a large demand for your goods.'

'How odiously you talk! By doing this I should gradually accumulate enough capital to buy a pony and trap—oh, Godfrey, just fancy!' Her eyes sparkled and seemed to look far beyond the walls of the little back room of the house in a street, in which as a matter of fact they were sitting. 'Then I should enlarge my borders. I might end by farming my own land—who knows? I read the "Farm Notes" in the *Journal* every week. I know lots about the rotation of crops, and the management of dairies, and what you feed cows on: and about silage also—sweet silage and sour silage, and——'

'You ridiculous child!' he exclaimed, but not in any tone that chilled her, for Letty laughed a low, pleasant laugh, drew a little nearer to him, and went on, after a pause:

'Laugh as much as you please. That is my dream, and will be if I live to be eighty.'

'You might secure it a great deal below that age,' he said, smiling. 'Go into a situation of some sort in the country, captivate a well-to-do yeoman, have the banns called, and there you are!'

'I am surprised at you, Godfrey! That may be one way of doing it, but to me there's a fascination about the idea of working your own way upwards and getting what you want by that means.'

He made no answer, unwilling to damp her ardour. They sat still for a few minutes longer, and then, as if with one accord, rose, Godfrey remarking:

'It is my last evening at home. I must go and talk to my mother for a little while.'

They found Mrs. Noble in the parlour, reading.

'What have you both been doing?' she inquired, as they came in.

'I've been helping Godfrey to pack,' said Letty, promptly. 'And we have been talking about round men and square holes, and about how you cannot fit one into the other—comfortably, that is.'

Mrs. Noble laid down her book. It was growing dusk, and though the April weather was not harsh, there was a small, bright fire burning in the grate. They sat round it, and after a while the mother began to ask her son for particulars concerning his appointment. It was the first time she had gone into details since he had given her the news that he was going away. It had become a settled conviction in the mind of Mrs. Noble, who was not of a very elastic and sanguine temperament, that this only and eldest child of hers was not, now or ever, going to do much for the renown or advancement of the family of which he was *de jure* the head. She had observed him and his doings, and what had seemed to her their results, and had formed her opinion upon these data—surely, she would have said with gentle dignity, she had a right to do so—and she had judged him. Parents, even mothers, do judge their children sometimes, and judge them unjustly. Even so tender-hearted and saintly a creature as Mrs. Noble had done this. She made no fuss or noise about it, never uttered any kind of complaint of it. 'He is my child,' she would have said, feeling that in making that admission of one who had proved a failure she was acting magnanimously. 'He is my child. Nothing could make me treat my child unkindly.' And yet she had treated him very unkindly; letting him go on his way (since he had chosen it), offering neither blame nor encouragement,

maintaining a chilling silence as to both failures and successes.

Godfrey was quite aware of it; he was cognisant of it all, in every nerve. But he was silent. To-night, after Letty had remarked that she would miss him horribly, and that it would be desolate without him—without any man in the house at all—after this it was hardly possible for Mrs. Noble not to say something about the coming departure.

'Godfrey says it is temporary,' she remarked, very quietly, and with, one might have said, a touch of resignation in her tone; 'so perhaps you will not long be deprived of his society.'

'Six months,' said Godfrey, in a matter of fact tone. 'I shall be back, Letty, in time to escort you to the unreserved seats at the first concert.'

'Pray, under what circumstances do you go, Godfrey?' asked his mother. 'Did I understand that it was to some sort of a water-cure establishment you had engaged yourself?'

'Yes, mother, partly. This Dr. Burton, it seems, is the resident physician at the establishment, and there is also a private practice of a kind—I don't know how much or how little it is—of which he is also sole possessor. Askley Bridge is a good many miles from the nearest large town. There is a kind of village or small town near, and some gentry and retired merchants and shopkeepers living thereabouts, so I understand. It will depend on their own ideas whether they send for me or prefer to have people over from York or Leeds or Bradford. Whatever they choose to give me, I'm allowed to take and make the most of it. And the salary for the six months at the Hydro is to be a hundred and fifty pounds. I couldn't afford to let that slip.'

'No, indeed,' said Letty, warmly.

'It would be a nice opening if there were any prospect of its being permanent,' said Mrs. Noble, with a slight sigh.

'Oh, I don't want it to be permanent,' Godfrey said, quietly. 'As I have been expounding to Letty, I don't care to settle into a country practice.'

'"Don't care" is very well for those whom fortune has placed above want,' his mother informed him; 'but there is an old adage about "beggars must not be choosers."'

'Oh, mother!' exclaimed Letty, in a tone of pained remonstrance. But Godfrey was absolutely silent. His sister glanced at him, and thought he could not have noticed; his expression being in no wise altered. Mrs. Noble, then, in a tone which seemed to imply that she was saying all, and more

than all, that could be expected of her under the circumstances, remarked:

'Well, I sincerely hope your venture may prosper for as long as it lasts. From the little I have ever heard of Askley Bridge, I should say it must be a very *healthy* place.'

'Oh, very!' rejoined Godfrey at once. 'Fine breezy moors all round, a beautiful river flowing through the valley, and a pure, bracing air.'

'Ah—h!' sighed Letty, in a portentous tone. And nothing more was said about Askley Bridge. Godfrey saw all his family again on the following day, before he departed. Mrs. Noble did not again allude to his affairs. Hilda exchanged a few hurried words with him, drawing on her gloves hastily before setting out.

'I'm so sorry you are going, Godfrey. I shall be quite anxious to hear what sort of place you find it. Of course, you'll write and tell us!'

'Of course,' said Godfrey, gravely.

'I must be off,' she added. 'I haven't a moment to spare. Good-bye, old fellow; I do hope you will like it.'

She put her hands on his shoulders, and kissed him affectionately, if in a hurried parenthetic kind of way. Godfrey returned her farewell, without more words. He knew exactly how it was. Hilda was fond of him, wished him well, and was sincerely sorry that he was going, but her life was too full just now of other things to allow her to dwell upon the matter. And to what purpose could she have dwelt upon it? She waved her hand to him and was gone; full of life, full of business and interests.

He and Letty departed after lunch at the same time; she to her afternoon's study, he in his cab in the direction of one of the great city stations.

'Mind, Godfrey,' were her last words to him, 'don't forget.'

'I shall not forget. Good-bye.'

CHAPTER VII.

MISS ALIZON—AND OTHERS.

It was a rarely beautiful spring evening on which Godfrey, after a rather slow journey of several hours' duration, found that the train from Kirkfence was drawing up at the little

wayside station of Askley Bridge. Askley Bridge had a station to itself by virtue of being the site of the great health resort (great, at any rate, as to the size) which towered conspicuously on a ridge of one of the nearer moors, and which by its obtrusive immensity and incongruousness spoilt the prospect, so far as beauty went, whenever the eye rested on it. In itself, Askley Bridge was quite too small and insignificant a place to have had a railway station devoted to it.

Godfrey, when he had left the train and was standing beside his luggage on the platform, and when the train had snorted slowly out and back again to wait till it was time for it to return to Kirkfence, realised what a very quiet little country place this was. He had time to look around him and 'take stock' of some of his surroundings, for they evidently did things there in a fine old leisurely style. Well, and who were they all he wondered to himself. A couple of farmers and one farmer's wife, who had done a day's shopping or business in the great smoky town of Kirkfence, from which they had been slowly toiling in the train for the last hour; two or three nondescript persons—a man and two ladies with piles of luggage, and one other figure—who and what might they be?

'Heah, pawtah!' cried the man, in an unmistakably 'foreign' accent, 'isn't theah an omnibus—aw—any kind of conveyance to Moorside?'

'Future patients of mine, perhaps,' Godfrey decided to himself, with an amused smile.

'Ah, theer is, but yo mun waäit a bit,' replied the ruddy-cheeked Yorkshireman who acted as porter, and then, in a very different tone, to that one other figure, who was lingering with some parcels near her:

'Your cart's just outside, Miss Alizon, and Peter's holdin' th' horse. Mun I carry your traps to't for ye?'

'Yes, please, Nuttall, at once,' answered a very clear and very imperious voice; and Godfrey, suddenly and unexpectedly interested, looked attentively, but did not see much to reward his curiosity—the side face, and the figure very plainly and trimly clad, of a woman a little above medium height, but not tall, and fair. So much he gathered—then her back was turned towards him and she marched briskly in the wake of Nuttall to the outside of the station.

A sudden determination came over Godfrey's mind. He was not going to wait with these languid people for the omnibus—not he! Wherever the place might be, the station had been built for it, so it could not be a great distance away.

'Here,' said he to another youth, who at that moment strolled upon the scene, 'send up that luggage with the rest to Moorside. I'm going to walk.'

And, not waiting to see whether his mandate was understood, he quickly stepped through the waiting-room and arrived at the outside of the station. All this hurry and decisiveness of action arose on account of the sound of Miss Alizon's voice, whoever Miss Alizon might be. The glimpse of her which he had caught had not revealed anything remarkable in the way of beauty—no magic of colour or outline, such as a woman's face or shape will sometimes betray as soon as she comes within sight. Nothing of all this was present, as far as he could judge—but the voice! What was there in that voice which drew him after her?

He emerged on the open cindered space in front of the little station in time to see the omnibus, a stuffy-looking structure drawn by two ill-groomed horses, just drawing up, and two gigs or the tail ends of them, jogging away, loaded with the stalwart farmers and their belongings, and in front of the building a very trim dog-cart, into which Miss Alizon had climbed, and the reins of which she had gathered up. She had just flicked her horse in a light but business-like manner. A faultlessly appointed groom had that moment released his hold of the horse's head, and the cart moved forward. The servant sprang up behind, and they were gone, as it seemed to Godfrey, with the speed of the wind. A pair of well-shaped shoulders, a trim, fair head and little round hat, and the attitude and seat of one who knew very well what she was doing; the blank impassive face of the servant, as he folded his arms—they turn a corner, eight miles an hour, and are gone—utterly gone.

'How tiresome!' said Godfrey, half aloud, while his face clouded over. Then he laughed to himself. 'How preposterous too,' he muttered, and walked away in the direction of the high-road.

Once upon it, it was impossible for him to mistake his destination. The dog-cart had disappeared; several roads branched off there, no vehicle was to be seen on any of them; but far above his head, towering on the hill-side rose Moorside, a huge ugly building in the French style, with a Mansard roof.

'What a thing to stick down on this country-side,' said Godfrey to himself. But there it was, and the way which led to it, straight before him, impossible to mistake.

It was rather a curious road. To the right, almost out of

the road, sprang the heather, and rose the moors. Far they extended, ridge upon ridge, with their dark brown crags cropping forth here and there, and the dazzling vivid green of the young bracken and grass sharply contrasted with, or springing forth from, the great black patches of charred heather and turf which had been burnt away during the autumn and winter. Moorside was on this side of the road, and at a considerable elevation above it. On the left hand was wood; here and there a gate or clearing, or the beginning of an avenue, seemed to show that there were houses somewhere in these woods, and houses of some size and importance, but none of them could be seen. Stepping to one side after he had walked some distance, and scrambling up a little bank of heather, Godfrey saw through an opening in the trees a portion of a lovely river winding peacefully through the bottom of the valley. There were trees on the other side of that, too; but beyond the trees there, as here, were long miles of sweeping bare-backed moor and fell, grey or blue, or pallid green in the shifting evening lights, for the sun was clear and bright, and now and then a thin, ragged cloud floated across it. The air blew upon him—how strong and keen after that of the town he had just left! With what a delicious fragrance it was laden! How still and calm was everything here, and how large and great! That he should have been in the smoke, the smuts, and the blackness even that very day—came to his mind like a dream. This prospect made him feel quiet and subdued; even while he rejoiced in it he felt its latent power of oppressing by its bleakness and loneliness, when one should not be exactly in the mood to sustain its severity, or to appreciate the beauty of that severity. Letty would have danced, sung, and cried aloud with exuberant glee, as he well knew, had she been there.

'Poor Letty! She would like this!' he said to himself, and struck across the heather, and climbed over the hills and hummocks of it, and traced a toilsome path up to the gate of the great building; finding, when he at last stood before the house, that he and the omnibus had arrived together after all. The two ladies with their boxes, the man with his eyeglass and his drawl, were all there; the women looking askance at the man, and he affecting an air of sublime indifference, but each secretly wondering who and what the others might be.

A housekeeper, or manageress, and a waiter, came forward, as the new arrivals came to a halt before the entrance-door. The housekeeper took the occupants of the omnibus into her

charge. The waiter advanced and asked Godfrey what he could do for him. Did he wish for accommodation?'

'I suppose I shall find accommodation provided for me,' said the young man. 'I should like to see the manager. I am Dr. Noble.'

'Oh, I beg your parding, sir,' the functionary apologised, in the handsomest manner imaginable. 'This way, if you please.' Godfrey followed him whither he led.

In the middle of April there was not a great number of visitors at the Moorside Hydropathic Establishment. About a dozen in all, Mr. Slater, the manager, informed Godfrey. It was now six o'clock, and they dined, said Mr. Slater, at seven.

'Dinner at seven!' Godfrey exclaimed, thinking that this did not sound very like the primitive hours which he had always imagined prevailed at such establishments.

'Yes,' Mr. Slater said, 'it's a comparatively new departure. People nowadays live so differently from what they used to, and the treatment, we find, can often be carried on even more conveniently with a late dinner than with an early one. And people like it better,' he added, with something approaching a wink.

'Oh, I see!' said Godfrey, repressing a smile. And, indeed, he saw one or two things very plainly, as much from what Mr. Slater looked as from what he said. One thing particularly he thought he saw—namely, that it paid better to indulge fashionable people by approaching as nearly as possible to their fashionable hours for eating and drinking. He felt also that though not a person of fashion himself, yet that he very much preferred eating his dinner at seven rather than at one o'clock.

'There's an hour yet to dinner-time,' Mr. Slater went on. 'If you will come with me, I'll introduce you to Dr. Burton at once.'

'Dr. Burton is here still, then?' said Godfrey, a little surprised.

'Why, of course. You wouldn't have had him leave the establishment and the neighbourhood without any one to apply to in case of emergency,' said Slater, with a curious expression.

'I thought he was ill, and going away for his health,' said Godfrey, indifferently.

'So he is. He'll most likely start to-morrow morning.'

Godfrey said nothing more, but followed Mr. Slater, who

took him upstairs, along many winding ways, passages, and corridors, and finally knocked at a door numbered 51.

'Come in!' said a voice from within; and they entered a well-sized, pleasant room, with two windows commanding a prospect over the whole valley, across to the fair and winding river, and the roads and the moors on the opposite side, to where these terminated in a high, blunt-topped hill, covered with gorse, fern, and heather, which Godfrey afterwards learned to know as 'The Beacon.'

'I've brought your *locum tenens*, doctor,' said Slater, going in first, and Godfrey very quickly made two observations in his own mind. First, that under no circumstances would he ever allow Slater, good sort of a man though he undoubtedly was, to address him, unreproved, in that free-and-easy, familiar manner. It was more than that; it was almost condescending, it seemed to Godfrey. Next, he perceived with much private astonishment that the invalid Dr. Burton, who was going away on sick-leave to recruit his shattered health, was a burly, big, clumsy looking man, who had hardly attained middle-age—a man who, certainly in his own opinion, and possibly in that of other persons, had some pretensions to good looks, but was as little like an invalid as any one Godfrey had ever seen. He rose, as Slater entered and spoke, and the younger man perceived, with his astonishment changing into contemptuous amusement (for Godfrey Noble could be very contemptuous sometimes), that the resident physician had a small table by his side, with a dainty little afternoon tea-equipage upon it—no languid fine lady could have had a prettier set-out with which to regale her friends. A book, which quickly disappeared under a newspaper, did not get slipped out of sight rapidly enough to prevent Godfrey's mercilessly quick eyes from seeing that it was bound in a suspiciously yellow-tinted board.

Standing up to receive his visitors, the doctor revealed a stalwart six feet of height, and a breadth in proportion to it. Godfrey, though very fairly developed in the slight, lean and muscular style, and with shoulders broad enough to bear a good many burdens, still looked a mere stripling beside the other.

'Mr. Godfrey Noble?' said the resident, graciously, and, it must be admitted, a little sleepily.

'H'm! A nap before dinner—or after lunch—which?' Godfrey speculated, as he inclined his head, and replied civilly:

'Yes; I have only just arrived.'

'Pray sit down. Would you like some refreshment before dinner—a cup of tea, or anything else?'

'Nothing, thank you. You have a fine prospect from your windows,' said Godfrey, stepping up to one of them and looking out.

'Yes, it is a fine sweep of country, but monotonous; it becomes very monotonous when you have looked at it every day for nearly a year.'

'Perhaps it may,' replied the young man; and then, feeling that it would be uncourteous to stand there longer, he turned towards the inside of the room again, and, seating himself, glanced round.

'The doctor has snug quarters, you see,' said Slater, in a tone of easy appreciation.

Godfrey merely bowed, rather gravely. He was not favourably impressed with the pretty, finikin appearance of the room. An æsthetic paper, with frieze and dado in the most approved style, covered the walls. Numberless pictures—little water-colours, etchings, sketches of all kinds—concealed a great portion of this paper. A high-art wooden mantelpiece, with endless little corners and shelves, all cunningly lined with looking-glass, groaned under a collection of pots, plates, ancient—or what looked like ancient—teacups and saucers, little nodding mandarins, and other objects of—*virtu*, perhaps. To Godfrey they appeared perfectly ridiculous. Had the room been a lady's bower, he could have understood, and even thought it all very pretty, and forgotten all about it five minutes after he had left it, but under the circumstances it, and its array of 'art' greens and blues and yellows, its pots and plaques and pictures, its stained floor, its little mats and rugs and curious tables, its bookshelves laden with bright-looking volumes, very unlike the sober outside of any professional library which he had ever seen, made a deep impression upon him, and set him very much at ease with regard to his own qualifications for the post he had undertaken.

'I understood that you were out of health,' he said, taking no further notice of Slater, who, however, remained for some little time standing with his arms resting on the top of a large easel, on which stood a portfolio, presumably filled with pictures.

'I am very much out of health,' replied Dr. Burton, his glance wandering towards Slater, while he spoke apparently with some little constraint. He laid his hand over his heart and murmured something about a chronic trouble—the nervous system—monotony of a country life—friction of official duties, and so forth. Godfrey nodded as he enumerated his symptoms,

and the younger doctor glanced critically at the eye and complexion of the elder one.

'About as much chronic trouble of the heart as I have myself,' he decided; and began to wonder what it meant. He did not find it out just at that moment, but he did learn it very soon afterwards, and arrived in that very moment at a pretty strong conviction on the subject of Dr. Burton, his character, his conduct, and his ill-health. Godfrey was not of a sour, suspicious, or condemnatory disposition, but the one word in which he summed up what he saw of Dr. Burton and his qualifications was, 'Humbug!'

'Then you will be going away immediately?' Godfrey asked, rather curtly.

'Well, yes; as soon as I can conveniently get off. My friends, to whom I should first have gone, have put me off. But to-ght's post, which will be in directly, may bring me a summons them. I hope it will.'

'I hope so, too,' said Godfrey, mildly and seriously.

At this juncture an attendant came in with several letters. he evening's mail had brought some correspondence for the octor. Slater now lifted himself from the easel and observed:

'Dr. Noble, when you are ready to go to your own room, if ou'll return to the office on the ground-floor, I'll send some ne with you to your quarters.'

'I will go now,' said Godfrey, promptly. 'Dr. Burton is ngaged with his letters, and may wish to answer some of them. erhaps after dinner we may have a little further conversation, hen I can hear all about what there is for me to do.'

'That would suit me very well,' said the doctor, visibly rightening at the prospect of getting rid of his visitors. Repressing a smile, Godfrey wished him good evening, for the present, and followed the manager out of the room.

'Is that Dr. Burton's consulting-room?' he asked, as they took their way to another part of the house.

'Oh, no!' said Slater, as if much shocked at such an idea. 'No, no, he sees his patients downstairs. That's his private sitting-room. He is considered to have very good taste, is Dr. Burton. That room is the admiration of all the ladies who are ever invited to enter it.'

'Oh, indeed,' said the other, but made no further comment.

'This is the bedroom we have given you, Dr. Noble. You will find it very quiet, and, I hope, comfortable,' said Slater, ushering the other into a well-sized, pleasant, and decidedly comfortable room.

'It looks all that I could desire,' said Godfrey, politely.

'Very well, then, I'll leave you. Dinner at seven, and—a—the doctor usually dresses for it,' said Slater, solemnly. 'It gives a *tone*, you know, to the whole thing. Most important to keep up the tone of a place like this.'

'Oh, all right,' said Godfrey, with a gravity equal to Slater's own. 'I'll bear it in mind. My luggage is here, I see, and there is time for me to dress and undress several times before dinner.'

'Just so. Seven, then!' With which he departed.

Godfrey, left alone, thrust his hands into his pockets, a for a few minutes meditated profoundly. Then he burst i a short laugh.

'Good Lord! I wonder if they have any idea how absurd all seems to an outsider. If Letty could be here! Better my power of looking dignified, though, that she is not. I the queerest place I ever got to. I hope that fellow w really go in the morning. I must have that point settl without delay.'

Then, laughing again to himself, he began his preparatio for helping to keep up the 'tone' at Moorside.

CHAPTER VIII.

MRS. VAN BIBBER ON THE SITUATION.

WHEN the gong sounded, Godfrey repaired to the dining-roo to which the majestic waiter obligingly conducted hi Arrived there, he found the company to consist, as Mr. Slat had prophesied it would, of about a dozen persons collecte together at one of the long tables, of which the room contained only two at this season. Dr. Burton, attired in correct evening costume, took the head of the table, and Godfrey found himself placed at some distance from him, as if to do the honours at the other end. He made no effort, however, to take upon himself any official responsibility in the matter. So long as the resident physician was there, he considered himself a guest only—entirely a private individual. He felt naturally a good deal of interest in the company, and observed them attentively. Next to him sat a lady whom, at first sight, and before he had heard her speak, he almost thought was a foreigner. She was tall, slender, and pale, with a sickly,

rather sallow complexion, fine dark eyes, languid in her attitude when silent and in repose, but alert and intelligent enough when she roused herself and spoke—which was very soon. Without waiting for an introduction, she began, after glancing for a moment at Godfrey:

'May I ask, did you arrive this afternoon?'

'English, after all,' said Godfrey to himself, and aloud he answered yes.

Her next remark enlightened him beyond mistake as to her nationality.

'Then I guess you're the physician who is to supersede Dr. Burton for a few months?'

'Yes, exactly,' answered Godfrey, turning to her with a smile, with the comforting conviction that at least she was not likely to say anything stupid, whether he might agree with her view of things or not.

'I heard you were expected to-day, and I presumed you must be Dr. Noble,' she said; and though she spoke with one of the native inflections, her voice was agreeably soft and low.

'That was not a very difficult surmise, I should think,' he said, with a smile. She also smiled, with a queer kind of look, and trifled with the food on her plate, holding her fork daintily, in a hand which was small, white, and delicate enough, but which, as well as her wrist and arm, was too actually bony to be beautiful. Magnificent rings, and not too many of them, sparkled on her fingers, and a handsome bracelet on her arm. Her dress, though quiet and of studied simplicity, was rich in the extreme, and was appointed with as much care in every detail as if she had been at some small and 'select' private dinner-party. She wore her hair dressed high, and elaborately rolled and curled in front, at a time when every correct British woman—maid, wife, or widow, girl in her teens or matron of autumn tints—did hers with one accord in the then orthodox 'penny bun' style. How she came to be at such a place at that quiet season was a mystery to Godfrey, but a mystery which she was soon obliging enough to solve for him.

'Do you know this part of your country at all?' she asked. 'But of course you do. It's so small—your country.'

'Small as it is, I have never been here before, and don't know the neighbourhood at all,' said Godfrey.

'You don't tell me! I've been here ever since February.'

'Have you, really? Wasn't it very dull?'

'Well, it has been pretty dull every once in a while,' she

said, with a laugh. 'I do hope you'll cheer us up a little. We need it.'

'Why stay so long in such a dull place?'

'Because I'm sick, and when you're sick you have to do a great many things you don't want to. I'm suffering from nervous prostration—that's what the physicians all say. I've tried everything for it, and I ain't a well woman yet. I came to travel in Europe at last, with my brother. He's just devoted to me, is Harold.' (It cannot be denied that she pronounced it something like Hahrold.) 'It was so sweet of him, I think, to leave all his interests at home, and come wandering about with a sick woman like me to Europe; and he ain't a bit fond of Europe. He loves America.'

'That is surely natural.'

'I guess so,' said she, with much emphasis. 'But folks are often so unnatural. Don't you think so?' Without waiting for him to reply, she went on in the same sweet monotonous voice:

'You see, my circumstances were peculiar. Mr. Van Bibber, my late husband, died two years and a half ago *vurry* suddenly and I couldn't rally from the shock. My nerves gave way, and I commenced to be sleepless; and when you lose your sleep, you know you have no pleasure in anything. I've been south. I went to Flawrida and spent a winter—the first winter, it was—at St. Augustine; and then we went west, and stayed a long time around there—at Los Angelos, and Santo Barbara, and Monterey—we tried them all—but none of them did me any good.'

'That was trying.'

'Wasn't it? And then we went home to Baltimore,' (which it must be owned she called 'Bawlt-mer,') 'but the social distractions there were too much for me, and finally we decided to come over to Europe and see if that would do anything for me. It's a year almost since we arrived, and I've done too much, I presume. We had a great many introductions, and the season in London was too much for me—though it was lovely, most lovely,' she concluded, with a sort of rapture in eye and voice, which last was never raised, never shrill, but continuous, magnetic, fascinating. Godfrey had just time to think that never in his life had he heard of such resolute exertions to 'get over' a husband's death, and to inquire:

'And after the season in London, which, I suppose, was last year's?'

'Precisely so. After that we did Scotland, and then late in the autumn went over to Paris. But I didn't get any better.

Too many new impressions, I imagine.' (Godfrey thought this very likely, and wondered what her capacities were when in robust health, if these were the means she used for repairing nervous exhaustion.) 'Harold wanted me to stay there, but I said "No; wherever we settle, let's go back to England. It's the only place in the world, outside America." I must say, I can't tell what so many of my compatriots see in Paris to go wild about, as they do. We came back to London in January last, and I consulted a leading specialist in nervous complaints. I wanted to go to Cheltenham, but he said, "No, that's the Mecca of American tourists when they are in England, and fancy they are going to be quiet. You require a much more bracing air, and a much more regular life than you'd find in Cheltenham." And then he told me to come here, and said that I needn't either go to him or write to him saying it wasn't doing me a particle of good till I had given it three months' trial. I haven't been here eight weeks yet, and I'm already much better. But I find it very dull, I must say.'

'And your brother?'

'Oh, Harold wanders around, hither and thither and yon. He goes to see places and people. You don't think I would be so outrageous as to wish him to stay here all the time? No. He's away now, doing the Channel Islands. He'll maybe return here next week; then I'll present him to you.'

'I shall be most happy to make his acquaintance. Is it permissible to ask if you are under any kind of treatment here?'

'Why, no,' said Mrs. Van Bibber, glancing towards the other end of the table to see what was going on there, and then in a still lower, richer murmur. 'D'you think I want to be "treated" by that effete old noodle? No, *sir*. I've gotten the express directions of my London physician, and if any complications were to arise I should write to him at once. I have entire confidence in him, but not a particle in this creature.'

Her eyes, but not her head, turned for a moment in the direction of Dr. Burton, who appeared to be engrossed in conversation with a red-headed, loud-voiced young woman who sat at his right hand. Godfrey by a powerful effort of will refrained from showing any change of countenance.

'Have you made his acquaintance yet?' asked Mrs. Van Bibber.

'Yes, I saw him for a few minutes before dinner, and am to do so again afterwards, as he is going away to-morrow.'

'Is he?' said she, calmly. 'Don't you believe it, Dr. Noble.

Shall I tell you when he'll go? Just as soon as you drive him away, and not one minute earlier.'

'That is a very serious thing to say, unless you have very good grounds for knowing it to be true,' said Godfrey with outward coldness, but feeling an inward uneasiness, for he had felt in his short interview with the doctor upstairs as if all were not quite as it appeared on the outside. But he showed no desire to hear more from Mrs. Van Bibber. She, however, was not to be silenced by a look.

'I'm quite aware of that. I'm not the woman to give myself away without knowing what I say. I'll be quite frank with you, Dr. Noble,' she added, 'and, if you like to ask me my grounds for saying what I do, I'll communicate them to you at the first suitable opportunity. But what I tell you is this—I guess you came to the conclusion that he is a complete fool, didn't you? Speak out; I ain't going to betray you—not a bit.'

Something in her glance and tone convinced Godfrey that she was speaking the truth; at any rate, as far as she knew it. It was, however, quite out of the question that he should begin to discuss Dr. Burton's character with a complete stranger, and he replied:

'No, indeed! In an interview of five minutes, and of the most superficial kind, it would be impossible to pronounce any one either a complete fool, or completely the reverse.'

'You're cautious, I perceive,' Mrs. Van Bibber observed, gravely, 'and you're in the right of it. I don't blame you. But I have seen a good deal more of him than you have. I'm one of those outsiders who watch the game, and see a good deal of it, and I tell you, he's more than a fool; he's a mischievous fool, and if you want to have any peace or to exercise any authority here, you get him away. Lose no time about it.'

'You are very kind,' said Godfrey, rather stiffly. 'I have no doubt everything will turn out as it should be.'

Mrs. Van Bibber, who could not fail to see his changed manner, was not in the least offended. She laughed to herself—a low amused laugh.

'You're not very gallant, I must say,' she told him. 'But I can understand your position. And if, in the course of a few days, you should find you want the assistance of a woman who isn't afraid to act as well as to speak, why, come to me.'

He merely bowed, without speaking; but he was uneasy about what he had heard, and was anxious to have a further interview with the doctor. There was a little silence just then

over the entire company, and he employed it in surveying the rest of them.

There was Dr. Burton at the head of the table, and, viewed in the sinister light cast upon him by Mrs. Van Bibber's accusations, Godfrey seemed to see in his expression not only fatuity, but also a certain sly and shifty look. He was angry with himself for being influenced by what she had told him, tried to think that both he and she were judging the man wrongly and uncharitably, and resolved at last to wait for further events before making up his mind on the subject. It was so absurd. What could possibly make him wish to stay in a place of the dulness of which he had complained, and which he had got leave to quit for six months for the benefit of his health? And yet, Godfrey could not but remember the very uncertain tone in which he had spoken of going, and the embarrassed look which he had cast towards Slater. All this gave food for thought, and that not of a very pleasant kind.

On the doctor's right hand sat the young woman already spoken of. She was largely made, and plain with that plainness which comes almost more from mental than physical causes; which is unredeemed by anything of refinement or intellect in glance or bearing. She carried one hand in a sling, and made what play she could with the other, occasionally accepting the doctor's assistance in cutting up her food. She spoke in a very audible voice; no one could have accused her of the bad habit of mumbling. She was also very voluble, and it was under cover of her remarks—loud, long, and continuous—that much of the conversation between Godfrey and Mrs. Van Bibber had been carried on. She now broke the silence by saying, in continuation of some former remarks:

'Yes, Brighton out of the season's horrid—perfectly horrid. What can ya do there? There's nothin' to do—positively nothin'. It's no end better even here.'

'Who is she?' asked Godfrey, in a low voice, of his neighbour.

'She's Mrs. Capstick. Her husband's an officer. He comes to see her sometimes, but he seems to prefer Brighton on the whole. She's hurt her wrist, and it's a very tedious case,' replied Mrs. Van Bibber; and this time it was her turn not to move a muscle, or to commit herself by eye or voice to any opinion of Mrs. Capstick, her appearance, conduct, or condition. Godfrey nodded. He saw his late fellow-travellers—the two ladies and the man from London; saw, also, a rather excited-looking young woman, with a high colour and dark eyes, who

sat opposite to Mrs. Capstick, and shared with her the honour of Dr. Burton's attentions. He saw, also, seven or eight others, men and women, who did not strike him as interesting or noticeable in any way.

When the meal was over, and the resident had said grace, they all rose from the table. Mrs. Van Bibber had said to Godfrey, with the utmost *sang-froid:*

'I shan't ask you to walk in the garden with me, and I shan't ask you to come and have some tea in my sitting-room. You are engaged to the doctor in the first place, and in the next, if you were to come, they would say we were hatching plots against the poor dear man. So I shall leave you to worry through as well as you can. I'm going to rest. I shall see you again to-morrow, and hear whether he is going.'

He bowed to her, as she took herself languidly away, and then, looking round, he saw—he was not a vain man, but he would have been very blind if he had not seen—that glances of interest and expectation were cast upon him by several of the ladies, and that the two or three men who were sprinkled amongst the company also looked towards him, as if they thought he might be able to do something to dispel the heavy cloud of *ennui* which seemed to overhang them all.

Godfrey, however, was intent upon getting his further interview with Dr. Burton, and, to that end, pursued him as he left the dining-room and asked if it would now be convenient to speak to him.

'Oh—a—yes, with pleasure,' said the other, looking anything but pleased. He made some kind of an excuse to Mrs. Capstick and his other neighbour, and led the way to his sanctum.

CHAPTER IX.

THE TUG OF WAR.

Dr. Burton's first observation, when he and his visitor were seated, appeared to Godfrey slightly irrelevant.

'An invaluable man—Slater,' he remarked.

'Is he? I dare say.'

'Where did you qualify, Dr. Noble?' asked the other, patronisingly.

'In London. Where did you?'

'A—in Glasgow.'

'Oh! Am I likely to have a busy time in the house or neighbourhood?'

'Not very busy in the house at present,' said Dr. Burton. 'There are several people here just now who are not under treatment at all. People who have just come for their Easter holiday, and have stayed on, you know, to amuse themselves.' He sighed, as if amusement were a sinful thing to think of in connection with Moorside. 'Not the people I care to have at all. I should like this place to have a far higher function in the world than that of a mere pleasure resort. I wish to see it become more of a hospital.'

'Oh, do you? I thought places like this were becoming more and more of pleasure resorts, or at any rate, rest resorts, where tired men and women may come for the freedom from trouble which they can't always secure in their own homes.'

'Ah, well, there's something in that. I am deeply interested in the "rest treatment." I have two patients here now, undergoing it. Of course you are acquainted with it?'

'In modified forms, yes. It is a pretty severe sort of thing in its complete shape, and only to be very cautiously applied, I should say. The only person I ever saw who had gone through the whole thing said she felt more like an idiot than a rational being when she came out of it.'

'Then it could not have been properly administered to her,' said Dr. Burton, with animation. 'It is the discovery of the age. It is at once so scientific and so in consonance with every requirement for the cases which now pass through our hands in such deplorable numbers. By it those melancholy instances of nervous collapse and utter prostration, which formerly kept their victims lingering on in a state of uncertainty and misery for months and even for years, can now be guaranteed as cures in a given number of weeks. The result is a mathematical certainty. To have the power of conferring this benefit upon suffering humanity is indeed a priceless blessing.'

'Do you mean that Weir-Mitchell ever claimed infallibility for his method?' asked Godfrey, curtly, while he looked at Dr. Burton with a glance far removed from that boundless awe and admiration which the latter seemed to think he deserved. The idea which now arose in might and strength in Godfrey's brain crystallised itself into one word:

'Quack.'

'Well—a—I think the treatment is susceptible of being indefinitely advanced,' rejoined the other.

'You can improve on Weir-Mitchell and his system, then? Yet he is a remarkably able man.'

'He is the greatest man of the century,' replied Burton, with intense enthusiasm. 'I have two cases, as I said, now here, undergoing the treatment.'

'The entire treatment, do you mean? Staying in bed, massage and seclusion, and all the rest of it?' asked Godfrey, with scant respect.

'Everything. Trained nurses included,' affirmed Dr. Burton, with a sort of solemn triumph in his tones.

'And were they very ill?'

'They were. Their friends little knew how ill.'

'And are they better?'

'Much better. They eat, they gain flesh, they——'

'Do they sleep?'

'Well, Mrs. Barton has complained a little lately of not sleeping so well.'

'In good spirits?'

'My dear sir, good spirits don't return all in a moment in cases of depression like these. Mrs. Barton is the depressed one; Miss Shaw's spirits are good.'

He caught sight of Godfrey's eye fixed with searching steadiness upon his own, and looked a little uneasy.

'I thought that improved sleep and better spirits were positive signs that the thing was working properly,' observed the young man, 'and that if those weren't present it was certain there was something going wrong.'

'Circumstances alter cases. When brain and body have been alike exhausted, the physical powers must recover strength before the mental and emotional ones recover tone. Dr. Mitchell himself says that with active nervous temperaments it is often difficult to get the brain into the necessary condition of torpor, and——'

'Beastly humbug!' was Godfrey's silent comment, and he thought the conversation so unprofitable that he rose.

'You must pardon me for cutting short the discussion. May I ask if you have arranged anything about leaving to-morrow morning?'

'I scarcely think it will be in the morning. This evening's post did not bring me the letter I expected. By to-morrow I shall know certainly.'

'Oh,' said Godfrey, profoundly dissatisfied with this statement of the case. 'I hope that before you go you will have time to put me *au courant* with the patients here and the

treatment you adopt for them. Do you keep your room, or shall I see you at breakfast?'

'No, I am really not equal to the exertion of coming down to breakfast. Afterwards I shall be most happy,' said Dr. Burton, who was one of the people who always are happiest in deferring things.

'But,' he added, buttonholing Godfrey just as the latter was going, 'let me detain you one moment while I read you this letter from a lady who, under the treatment we have been speaking of, entirely recovered the use of her limbs, which had been partially paralysed, and——'

'I can quite believe that. Partial paralysis and neurasthenia are two different stories,' said Godfrey, standing impatiently while the other read out a letter from (so Godfrey gathered) an enthusiastic and ignorant female who had been allowed to leave Moorside under the impression that the treatment from which she had derived so much benefit was the sole invention of the resident physician of the establishment.

'Ah, it is truly soothing and inspiriting to know one's services are appreciated,' said the doctor, dreamily, while Godfrey at last succeeded in making his escape.

'Twaddling ass! I should be at loggerheads with him directly,' he said to himself, as he threaded his way with many mistakes through the maze of corridors and passages to the entrance and stepped into the garden. The dusk was fast falling. The figures of those who had been strolling about the grounds had now nearly all disappeared: a crescent moon was showing silvery clear in the eastern sky. There was a prospect of solitude. He had called in at his own room and armed himself with his pipe and tobacco-pouch, and now, getting away from the house, he felt for the first time free and undisturbed.

It was a perfect spring night, balmy and mild, although the surroundings of the place were miles of bleak and barren moor. Godfrey satisfied himself, even in this waning light, that the Moorside gardens were large and beautiful, and then, turning at haphazard along a broad, pleasant walk, under trees, he found that it led to a gate, outside of which he thought he saw the shimmer of a white road. Going up to the gate he found he was right. A broad, well-kept turnpike road stretched to the right and left of the gate, uphill to the right, downhill to the left, and on the other side of this road, undivided by any jealous fence or envious barrier whatsoever, rose the ragged edge of the open moor. Feeling exhilarated and delighted, Godfrey

essayed to open the gate, but found it fastened. It was the work of a moment to lay his hand on the top bar and vault over it, and then a comfortable feeling of freedom, rest, and peace stole over him as, quickly crossing the road, his foot sank deep into the elastic ling, and later trod the fine sweet moorland grass. For a few moments—only a very few—his mind was still occupied with what had just been taking place in the house; then the soft yet bracing moorland air seemed to blow it clean away—the meanness, the ugliness, the contemptible pettiness of it all. Let them fight out their little bickering battles; let them be as filled with 'envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness' as it listed them; here was a fair and quiet spot; a haven of peace and refuge. He quickly felt soothed and rested. The night was very still, and the moon, though still in her first quarter, very bright. Everything looked dim, silvery, softened. He revelled in it, and paced the heather, or rather stumbled about in it, for some time; then, turning aside from it, struck the road once more, and walked onwards and upwards, feeling renewed and calmed in every nerve. So he went on till he came to the entrance of a solemn and mysterious-looking wood, which in this atmosphere looked impenetrably dark. He paused there, and stood near a great rugged boulder which, under the shade of some trees, seemed to stand on the very edge of a great precipice, down which the wood flung itself, so that tree-tops were all he could see, and the faint untimely twitter of some little misguided bird, mistaking the moonlight for early dawn, all that he could hear. How beautiful it was! Now he had forgotten all about the bickerings down at the house—the fatuous doctor, the over-familiar manager, the eloquent Mrs. Van Bibber, and all the rest of them.

But surely there had been something else besides this moonlight scene which had soothed his feelings and given him an interesting impression of things in general, and a healthy desire to live on still many days. What had it been? He went over his day, in memory, from the very beginning, with a parenthetical—'Poor Letty! how I wish she was here!'

At last, 'Ah, yes!' he said aloud. He had remembered. It was the other passenger at the station; it was 'Miss Alizon,' whose face he had not succeeded in seeing, though her voice he had heard. What a round, fresh, harmonious voice, with all its tone of authority! How different from that of either Mrs. Capstick or Mrs. Van Bibber! Except his own sisters, he knew of no woman with a voice so perfectly pleasant, so attuned to

harmony and to all agreeable feelings as that of this unknown. And one does not go into raptures and dreams over one's sister's voice even though it should contain the music of the spheres.

'Miss Alizon—I wonder who and what she may be!' he speculated, as he thrust his empty pipe into his pocket, and after giving a last look at the few twinkling lights in the valley below turned back, got into the grounds as he had got out of them, and on re-entering the house found it was after ten o'clock.

Godfrey slept well and peacefully that night; his repose untroubled by dreams, or his waking by forebodings. But, though he did not know it, he arose on the following morning to battle. A sharp, tough, and disagreeable experience was before him—as unpleasant a beginning to his new career as could well be imagined.

The company of the evening before, with some few exceptions, of whom the doctor was one and Mrs. Van Bibber another, assembled in the dining-room for breakfast. It was only after that meal was over that Godfrey, despite his misgivings, fairly began to realise his anomalous position; and as soon as he did realise it he began to chafe under it, angrily if silently. Was he to undertake the conduct of the medical part of the establishment, or was he not to do so? If he were to do it, the sooner he established himself in a consulting-room and saw his patients the better. If not—Godfrey paused in his mental calculations—if not, he did not shirk the truth—the sooner he went home again the better. He went to the office, and found Slater there, reading a newspaper and looking the image of leisurely indifference. Altogether there did not seem to be any great press of business at the establishment, and manager and housekeeper, men and maids alike, moved in a very easy, comfortable kind of way, as who should say to any impatient outsider, 'Hurry no man's cattle.'

'Is Dr. Burton leaving to-day, do you know?' inquired Godfrey.

Slater looked up slowly and vaguely, his mind still buried in the news he had been reading.

'I really haven't the least idea, Dr. Noble.'

'Well, do you know if he is going to see his patients, or if he wishes me to do so?'

'That I can't tell you. He's not out of his room yet.

Still more irritated and dissatisfied, Godfrey went away, and

after hesitating a little came to the conclusion that Dr. Burton, whether out of his room or not, was not so great an invalid as to be unable to give audience to a brother-leech. He, therefore, went upstairs, and, knocking at the doctor's door, was bidden to come in. Entering, he found the resident in his dressing-gown, reclining in a deep easy-chair, and in the act, unless Godfrey was much mistaken, of slipping out of sight the very same yellow-backed novel which he had hurried into concealment the day before.

'Oh!' said he, in some confusion, 'is it you? What can I do for you?'

'You can inform me whether you are leaving here to-day,' said Godfrey, curtly. He did not try to infuse any suavity into his tone.

'I—a—think *not* to-day,' said Dr. Burton, slowly, and Godfrey saw a light, not altogether agreeable, come into his small, unintelligent eyes. He evidently misliked the tone in which the young man spoke to him, and looked as if he could be both obstinate and malignant if the fancy took him.

'Then will you kindly make me acquainted with the different cases I have to attend to,' said Godfrey, at once making up his mind as to the course he would take. 'It is getting on for ten o'clock, and I wish to be punctual. I see the consultation hours are from 10.30 to 12.'

'Oh, well,' said the other, with aggravating slowness, 'I think that for to-day I'll attend to them myself. If they were to see a stranger, and know that I was still in the home, they might think me unkind. They depend on me very much, especially Mrs. Barton and poor Miss Shaw.'

'As you please,' said Godfrey, thinking parenthetically that he pitied the patients who depended much on that flaccid-looking mass of flesh and muscle, without will or intellect—obstinacy served him for the first, and a kind of low cunning occupied the legitimate place of the second. Godfrey saw clearly now that Dr. Burton intended to make himself nasty. This confirmed the young man in his intention to show his teeth in his turn, and he cast ceremony to the winds.

'You don't seem to me to have grasped the present situation,' he said, speaking very coolly, and quite master of his temper, now that it had come to serious business. 'At least, we don't seem to take the same view of it, judging from your proceedings, so I may as well state plainly to you how things seem to me. I came here on the understanding that you were going away for six months, and that I was to take charge of your

patients and of your practice while you were absent. I do not believe in any such thing as divided authority in such a matter. I wish you to understand that while you are in the house I refuse to see a single patient, either inside or outside this establishment, and also that if I am not left, at the end of three days from my arrival, with the place in my own hands, I shall throw up my engagement here and return home, expecting compensation, of course, for the loss of the time and the money I have been led into wasting over this absurd business.'

'Dr. Noble!' exclaimed the other, raising himself up, and trying in vain to look either self-possessed or dignified, 'this is strange language, sir, from one gentleman to another—very strange. I really——'

'It is plain language,' retorted Godfrey, with imperturbable calmness, 'and every word of it is meant. I beg you to observe that.'

'I see very plainly that that Mrs. Van Bibber—that American female—a lady I cannot call her—has——'

'Oh, come!' said Godfrey, soothingly, 'don't do like that, you know. For heaven's sake fight it out like a man, and don't drag an unoffending lady's name into the discussion. And if you want to go into battle properly I should advise you to put on your coat. People can't fight effectively in dressing-gowns. You will remember what I have said to you. Perhaps, though, you could give me your answer now. You may feel a little more disposed to leave to-day after this.'

This was perhaps going a little too far. At any rate, Dr. Burton, with a crimson face, rose up, and, pacing the room in his hampering robes, said fiercely:

'I shall leave when I choose, sir, and not one instant before —not one instant.'

'Oh, all right. Then I consider myself at liberty to take what further measures I think fit,' said Godfrey, into whose mind another idea had all at once come. 'I will wish you good morning.'

He closed the door and walked quickly away, down to the office again and to Slater, who was still reading the news with the deepest interest.

'A supine lot!' said Godfrey to himself in great disgust.

Slater had looked up as he came in, and something in the young man's expression caused him to drop his paper, sit up straight, and inquire if Godfrey had seen the doctor.

'Yes, I have. Who is it who manages this concern? It's a limited company, isn't it?'

'Yes, it is. There's a body of directors, and a secretary and chairman and committee.'

'Ah! When do they meet?'

'Why, they met the day before yesterday. They won't be here again for a fortnight.'

'Please to give me the secretary's address.'

Slater rose. 'I hope nothing unpleasant has taken place,' he began.

'Something that I think decidedly unpleasant has taken place,' said Godfrey, with suppressed anger. 'So far as I can make out, I seem to have been brought here under false pretences.'

'No, indeed, sir, you weren't,' said the manager, earnestly.

'Then what does Dr. Burton mean by declining to go away and let me take my place here? Does he suppose that I am going to loaf about the place, waiting for him till he makes up his mind to be gone? He must be out of his senses if he thinks any such thing. I have told him what I intend to do, and I now wish the directing body to know of my decision. I shall write to them this morning.'

Slater was thoughtfully silent for a few minutes. Then, by degrees, a slow kind of grin spread itself over his features.

'Look here, Dr. Noble,' said he; 'have a little patience and forbearance. You are young, and can no doubt understand when I tell you' (he winked portentously) 'that there's a lady in the case.'

Godfrey stared at him.

'A lady in the case! What in the name of all that's idiotic do you mean?'

'A lady who comes here frequently—a lady with a fortune. Dr. Burton has long taken the tenderest interest in her. She told us she was not coming here this spring; her health required that she should go abroad. In confidence I may tell you that the doctor was going abroad too. But just before the day you came he heard from Mrs. Ackers—she is a widow—that all her plans had been changed. She was not going abroad, after all; she was coming here.'

'Well?'

'Well, of course, he would like just to see her.'

'And when does she come?'

'Uncertain. She is a very uncertain lady, is Mrs. Ackers. She might be ill, or her dog might be ill; and in either case she would wait till the illness was over.'

'I never heard such preposterous stuff in my life. I shall do

exactly as I decided to do. If he wants to see her, they must make it convenient to meet elsewhere. Either he goes from here, or I do. The address, if you please, Mr. Slater.'

Unwillingly, Slater produced a sheet of paper, saying that the addresses of all connected with the establishment would be found on it. Godfrey carried it away with him to his room, and then looked at it. It was a prospectus of the Moorside establishment, giving a flourishing account of its charms and advantages, high amongst which appeared to be reckoned the resident physician, Philip H. Burton, Esq., M.D., etc. Then followed a long list of names of those concerned with the general management. Running his eye over these, in search of the secretary, Godfrey saw inscribed, as one of the directors, 'Giles Barras, of The Manor, Askley Bridge, Esq., J.P.'

'The very thing!' he muttered. 'I won't write till I have tried him. What's more, I'll try him now.'

Without more ado, he seized upon a pair of gloves and his card-case, and left the house, resolving to inquire outside concerning the way to Mr. Barras's house, for he had no wish to let Slater know on what errand he was bound.

CHAPTER X.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

Going down the drive, and out at the principal gate, Godfrey saw a cluster of cottages by the roadside. He repaired to one of them, knocked at the door, and inquired of the mistress of it if she could tell him where the Manor was, where Mr. Barras lived.

'It's a good step, if you're walking,' replied the woman. 'Three miles, good, I should say. Eh, yes, ivery one knaws where Mesther Barras lives. Ah s'ud think so.'

Then she pointed out to him the very same white road on which he had wandered last night in the moonlight, and he gathered that he had to skirt the wood which he had then entered, and that somewhere on the other side of that wood, far beyond Askley Bridge, and near a village of its own, he would find the Manor. Any one, so his informant said, would tell him the road; and she repeated her assertion that every one knew Mr. Barras.

He thanked her, and, stepping out, was soon on the road,

past the gate of the Moorside grounds; the gate over which last night he had clambered. The morning was a lovely one; birds were singing, vegetation springing forth, sky and earth alike smiling and jocund. Godfrey could have enjoyed it intensely under other circumstances; but ever as he pursued his way the reflection pursued him—how mean and debasing it all was. As has been intimated, he was not garrulous *in the* bosom of his family. Whatever might have been his natural disposition, he had never received much encouragement to babble about himself, his inner thoughts and doings. But he had his hopes, his aspirations, and ideals for all that, which perhaps he had cherished the more faithfully on account of his silence about them. One of his fancies, when he had learnt that he was coming to Askley Bridge, and one with which he had greatly pleased himself, had been that though the appointment was in the country, far from the busy hum of men, and removed from all the stimulus of example and competition which he loved, yet that it was perhaps a great opportunity for doing good in a quiet way; for encouraging the toilworn and brain-weary ones who came to such places to rest and be thankful, to forget the cares they had left behind them, and to teach them how simplicity of life might help them along in their march through the world.

'Plain living and high thinking.' Some such ideal had been before him, and he had hoped to find in Dr. Burton one of his own way of looking at things, who would leave him in possession, perhaps, of many interesting data concerning his work. And what had he found? he asked himself, walking rather faster in his excitement. A supine, self-indulgent creature, disposed to consult nothing but his own inclinations, and to be malicious if he were made uncomfortable or stirred from his stagnation: a set of women, vulgar or gossiping, who did not seem to have much the matter with them except idleness and selfishness—uncombated selfishness—the most demoralising of dispositions. The establishment itself was suited to its guests, a place arranged with a view to attracting visitors and making money out of them ('and I suppose, after all, that is its *raison d'être*,' he admitted to himself, with a smile), but with a lax administration, with corruption and inefficiency on every side. The patients whom he had so far seen were *malades imaginaires;* their physician an ignorant quack. It was sickening. He was to be there for six months. The most quixotic person would hardly advocate the initiation of sweeping reforms during that period, with the certainty that they would make

him detested while he stayed, and would all be undone as soon as he should leave.

Godfrey felt very much disheartened as he plodded along the road leading to the residence of Giles Barras, Esq. Generous young souls detest meanness, lies, and intrigues—they cannot see what purpose they serve, or imagine any enjoyment in the practice of them. The more he reflected on matters, the more disgusted he grew with what he had seen, and the more resolved that what he had said to Dr. Burton should be his ultimatum; if he were not within two days from now left with the place to himself he should leave it and return home.

As his walk progressed, the fresh and wild and, to him, attractive character of the scenery became more and more apparent, and gradually dissipated his unpleasant thoughts—to the left sweep upon sweep of the wildest, barest moorland, and to the right ever the delightful wood, which might for stillness and a certain quietly waiting atmosphere there was about it have been the enchanted forest in his sister Hilda's favourite *Phantastes*. More than once he had to cross a gurgling brown stream, running down from the hills and making sweet music as it

> 'strolled along
> Its pebbled bed, with summer song,'

into the wood, where it disappeared. At last, where the road ever toiling gently upwards made a sweep to the right, Godfrey found, on turning the corner, that the wood came to an end, and that there was a wall and a gateway with an ancient iron gate, all in scrolls and twists of curious design, which, little as he knew of such things, he felt sure was both curious and beautiful. It was certainly uncommon, when taken along with the two hoary, moss-grown stone gateposts, with shields let into them bearing ciphers, each post having a strange heraldic beast sitting atop of it, clasping another shield on which were coats-of-arms. This must without doubt be the entrance to the Manor. The cottager had assured him that any one would tell him the way to it, but he had not met a soul of whom he could inquire. He pushed open the gate, and immediately found himself on a sweep of gravel, smoothly rolled. The house hid itself jealously round a corner, but when at last he came within view of it, Godfrey could not resist the pleasure of standing still and looking at it, so beautiful, so genuine and unaffected in its antiquity was this modest, yet roomy old mansion, basking in the sunlight; for it faced due south, with its smoothly shaven velvet turf, its straight beds and borders,

gay and radiant with lovely spring flowers—daffodils, primulas, auriculas, and even the remains of some crocuses, snowdrops, hyacinths. All was very still in the vicinity. Godfrey saw not a sign of life—not even a dog on the top step of the flight which led to the front door. He presently ascended these steps, and found that modern weakness had been so far humoured as to have the massive old iron knocker superseded for daily use by a bell; but when he pulled the said bell, it sounded with a hollow clangour which had in it something solemn and portentous.

Nothing portentous, however, answered its summons; merely a neat-looking servant-maid, who told him she thought Mr. Barras was 'about,' and forthwith showed him into one of the sunny rooms in front, the blinds of which were partly let down, so that, after the glare outside, it seemed quite dark to Godfrey. He groped his way to a chair, notwithstanding, and having giving his card to the girl, sat down to wait. He could gather no details of the room, except that it seemed spacious and pleasant, that there were bookcases along one side of it, and an odour of tobacco in the air.

He had had time to grow somewhat accustomed to this dim light, and to discern evidences of sober colouring, and of massive, worn furniture of an old-fashioned kind, when a rapid, firm step sounded on the tiles of the hall, and immediately a tall man walked quickly into the room, laying a shabby wide-awake on the table, along with Godfrey's card, and then saying inquiringly:

'Dr. Noble?'

Godfrey rose. 'Yes. You are perhaps Mr. Barras?'

'I am,' replied the man; 'it's pitch dark here. Let me draw up the blind;' which he did, letting a flood of sunshine and light into the room.

Then he turned and stood revealed to Godfrey as a spare, muscular being, who might have been any age from thirty to forty-five, with a lean, keen, brown face which the young man liked, a big brown moustache, dark, deep-set eyes, and a very shrewd, determined expression. His attire was that of a man who had been 'about the place' all morning; that is, shabby, not to say ragamuffinly in the extreme—trousers, coat, and boots vying with one another for the palm as to inherent disreputableness of appearance He was a gentleman, every inch, and looked as if he had been a traveller or a soldier, or both.

'Sit down, won't you? I did not know you had already got to Moorside,' he said.

'I only came yesterday afternoon,' replied Godfrey. 'Things there seem to be in a somewhat peculiar condition. I have found myself forced to take a line of action which is intensely disagreeable to me. I saw your name on the list of directors, and I come to trouble you with an account of the situation.'

Thereupon he briefly and succinctly related what had happened since his arrival at the establishment, and wound up by repeating Slater's statement about the lady who was in question.

'I give you that for what it's worth,' he added with a half-laugh. 'It may be true, or it may not; at any rate, it furnishes some kind of explanation of his otherwise inscrutable behaviour.'

Mr. Barras tilted himself back in his chair, and laughed with intense enjoyment.

'What a tale!' he cried at last. 'What a glorious tale to be sure!'

'Queer as it sounds, every word of it is true,' retorted Godfrey, rather curtly.

'My dear sir,' said the other, grave again in an instant, 'you surely don't suppose I doubted that? I laugh because it is so magnificently characteristic of the man, and because it affords an illustration of my own foresight. I'm pleased with it, because it will enable me to say to them, "I told you so," at the next Moorside committee meeting.'

'Told them what?' asked Godfrey, appeased.

'What I have told them fifty times before: that Burton is an incompetent ass, who would never do them any good, but harm. Why, the fellow has no knowledge—absolutely no practical knowledge. He has picked up enough to enable him to qualify in a fashion, but when it comes to applying even those rags of theory—' Mr. Barras snapped his fingers. 'He takes up with every new nostrum which he can partially understand, and advertises it as a panacea. To every one who comes to him he recommends a trial of it—just now I believe it is rest, which is to be secured by first of all reducing your body to a carcase, and your mind to a jelly—he promises a complete cure within a limited time, and as people often go to those places in a feeble state of mind as well as of body, I am afraid he has victimised not a few. It's astonishing how people will shell out money they can ill spare in order to obtain relief from illness, mental and physical.'

'It is not at all astonishing to me,' said Godfrey, 'and if they get the relief the money is well spent, no doubt of that. But in the meantime he is victimising me.'

'Oh, we'll very soon put that right, ass that he is,' said Mr. Barras, in an easy tone. 'I'll call upon him—he is very fond of me, is Burton. I appreciate him and believe in him so blindly, and never see through his innocent little ruses. He is probably just now congratulating himself that the committee will not meet again for nearly a fortnight. Give me the pleasure of your company at lunch. I'm a bachelor, and I am alone just now. And in the afternoon I will drive over to Moorside, and take you with me. I have a call to make in that neighbourhood. I can almost promise you that he will be off by one of the early trains to-morrow.'

He laughed again—a laugh expressive of keen, if not purely benevolent enjoyment.

Godfrey, very much relieved by the view of the affair taken by the other, made some little demur about remaining for lunch, which was resolutely overruled by Mr. Barras, who told his guest that his habits were very primitive.

'I rise at six, or often before, on these fine mornings, and all through the summer,' he said; 'not because I think it is virtuous to do so, but because I like it. I got used to early rising in India, when I was stationed at Ghyapur, and I have kept to it ever since. I have breakfast at seven, and with the life I lead, I'm ready "ready aye ready" for lunch at half-past twelve, and sometimes earlier. Your walk will have given you an appetite even if you don't usually have one.'

'But I do,' Godfrey answered him.

'That's right. I really am very sorry that you should have had such an unpleasant beginning at Moorside. If I may ask —was it choice or necessity that took you there?'

'A little of both, I think,' replied Godfrey; and how it came about he really did not know, but in a short time his host was in possession of most of the simple facts of his history, even to the thing which troubled Godfrey the most, and which none of his family imagined he ever thought of—that with his expensive education, and his seven-and-twenty years, and all his willingness to work, he was in this temporary, makeshift sort of position, while Hilda, younger than he was, and with a less costly equipment, was a person of importance, and a woman who was making an income.

'I've never told my mother how I feel it,' he added, frankly and simply, 'because if I were to do so she would at once turn upon me and say, it was my own fault, and that I should have taken her advice and not been ungrateful to my benefactors, and all that. And I can't quite see that, after all. I know

that I am happier now, with all my disadvantages, than I should have been as a clerk in a merchant's office, even with the prospect of five thousand a year in the distance.'

'Oh, you are all right,' said Giles Barras, in his pleasant, decided tones. 'I've gone through much the same kind of thing. You'll come out all right in the end. I went into the army. I thought I could see the world in that way. I was not born the owner of this,' he glanced round the room, 'my eldest brother had it. Poor John! He was a good fellow. They were all against my going into the army. There were several other ways in which I could have been so much better provided for; the Church amongst them. But I could not swallow that somehow; though I'm a churchman to the backbone, I'm not a parson in any way or shape. Or I could have gone into a mercantile life, also. My father had no objection. I took my own way, and though I had a pretty narrow time of it for years I never repented. No more will you if you really love your profession.'

'I thought I did,' said Godfrey. 'But Burton and his crew are an eye-opener.'

'They are no fair specimens, and you must know that even better than I do.'

'Did you leave the army, then, when your brother died?'

'Yes, it is six years ago now. I knew there was plenty here to fill up all my life, and outside interests quite enough to keep me from being dull,' he added, with a peculiar, not very sweet smile, as if at some private recollection, humorous but not altogether agreeable. 'So I resigned and came to settle here.'

Here the maid-servant who had admitted Godfrey came to announce lunch.

'Come this way,' said Barras, leading Godfrey across the wide, pleasant passage, from which a glimpse was to be caught of a wonderful-looking black oak staircase, which went up in twists and spirals from one corner of the hall. It glittered like glass, and near the foot of it a second rosy girl, in a tidy lilac print gown, was on her knees, rubbing and polishing as if her life were at stake.

The dining-room was no less pleasant a place than the parlour in which they had been sitting, and a substantial lunch was set out on the table.

'If it is allowable to ask,' said Godfrey, 'how came you to be one of the directors of the Moorside Hydropathic establishment?'

'Well,' said Barras, the same queer look glinting, as it were,

over his features, 'my motives were mixed—like yours in becoming the physician there. Our motives generally are mixed, I find. I did think, at the time, that it would be a useful place, and that it might be made, in a legitimate way, into a paying concern. I don't think so now. I have quite abandoned that idea. At least it never will while Burton is there to doctor the fools and disgust the rational part of the company. But he's in, and it will not be so easy to get him out, without a row. Then, also, a friend of mine was passionately opposed to the whole thing, prophesied its immediate failure, and pooh-poohed everything connected with it to such an extent that out of sheer opposition I took up the cudgels in favour of it.'

Seeing Godfrey's look of surprise, he laughed aloud.

'You think that was pretty weak, don't you? But, you see, you don't know my friend. Some of our friends exercise this soothing influence over us, you know. From not caring two straws whether the Moorside Hydropathic place was a failure or a success, it became a matter of honour with me that it should be a success. I have diligently attended every directors' meeting, have gone into all the accounts, pondered over the different ways of managing it, and, in fact, have taken all the trouble in the world about it. I don't know how long I shall go on in the same intelligent style,' he added, with another laugh, as he leaned back in his chair, and looked out through the window, and across the garden. Godfrey could have sworn that there was bitterness in his smile, though none in his manner.

'Have some more claret,' he said suddenly, as if wishful to change the topic.

'No, thank you. I hope you will go on a little while longer, at any rate. For six months, say, when I shall have completed my term of office at Moorside.'

Barras smiled and shrugged his shoulders, and they said no more just then about Moorside or the complications connected with it.

After lunch Mr. Barras suggested a cigar in the garden, until the cart came round.

'I have ordered it for a quarter before two,' he said, looking meditatively pleased, as he blew out the first ring of smoke. 'My horse will carry us to Moorside in less than half an hour. I shall then catch the worthy doctor—trap him in his after-lunch nap. He loves so to be disturbed in that sweet occupation. I suppose,' he added, with a searching sort of glance at Godfrey,

'you don't mind being seen driving up with me? It will be over the whole place in less than half an hour that you came and fetched me to turn Dr. Burton out.'

'I've done nothing that I was not driven to do,' said Godfrey, indifferently. 'I am not afraid of being seen with you, if you don't object to be seen with me.'

'Not a bit,' said Giles.

They both laughed, and continued to stroll about the garden for a time. Then Godfrey was left alone, while Barras went away, to make himself, as he said, presentable. Soon after his return, in garments as respectable as his others had been the reverse, a very trim dog-cart, reminding Godfrey of the one driven by 'Miss Alizon,' the day before, came round. They got into it, and then, as it seemed, in another moment they were bowling smoothly and swiftly along the road, in the direction of Moorside.

CHAPTER XI.

'VALE' DR. BURTON!

'I WILL go straight upstairs to see him,' said Giles, as they drew near to their destination. 'Where shall I find you, when I have settled him?'

'On the terrace, under the drawing-room windows.'

'Very good. Upon my word, I begin almost to enjoy this adventure. I don't like making people uncomfortable just for the fun of the thing, but I do love to see a humbug writhe.'

'So do I,' assented Godfrey.

They drove up to the main entrance, and their summons soon brought out the sleepy waiter, whose countenance changed, developing into something like a faint, respectful grin, as he replied, to Mr. Barras's inquiry, that Dr. Burton was in, upstairs in his room.

Giles went into the house, and Godfrey made his way round to the terrace he had spoken of; a pleasant walk, looking due west, and bordering a large space of fine green turf, in the midst of which stood a noble old oak-tree. Other terraces surrounded this lawn, and long beds thickly planted with rose bushes, which in the summer made a sweet and gallant show. As he turned the corner of the house and stepped upon the terrace, Godfrey was rather sorry than otherwise to see Mrs.

Van Bibber slowly pacing it. She was dressed [illegible] kind of garden *negligée*, with a large, lace-covered [illegible] a pretty figure to form one of some large and [illegible] country-house party, but singularly inappropriate, as [illegible] keenly felt, to the deserted grounds of a hydropathic est[illegible] ment in the dead season. Mrs. Van Bibber, like so many oth[illegible] American women, had an almost unerring instinct about t[illegible] beauty of any particular dress; she, like most of her country[illegible] women, wore more becoming and elegant things than English[illegible] women of the same class would have done; only she—and the[illegible] —were generally all wrong about the suitableness of the occa[illegible] sions on which to wear the said pretty things. She seemed[illegible] however, as happy, airing her finery alone, as if she had been[illegible] the centre of an admiring crowd. She hailed Godfrey at once, and claimed him for her own.

'Well, well!' cried she: 'where on urth have you been, doctor? I wondered if you had run away after due reflection on what I told you last night.'

'I am not quite so easily frightened away as all that,' he told her. 'I have only been taking measures for making Dr. Burton run away.'

'No! You don't say!' she cried, admiringly. 'I think that's so spirited of you—and so prompt. But how have you managed it?'

'Oh, some one is doing it now; telling him a ghost story or something,' said Godfrey, with premeditated vagueness, as he turned and began to pace the terrace with her.

'Well, I do hope you'll drive him away, and remain yourself,' she said, candidly. 'Of all things under the canopied heavens I do hate a humbug the most. And he is a rank humbug.'

'Have you been out long?'

'Only since lunch, and they don't give you a meal so heavy as to impede your walking powers,' she said, sarcastically. 'That's my great trial in Europe—I do not like your cookery. I do not like your breakfasts anywhere, and here I dislike them most of all.'

'Breakfast—bacon, eggs, cold meat!' Godfrey said; 'what more could you want? And marmalade,' he added, with animation. 'Why, the marmalade was excellent.'

He spoke on this subject with all the fatuous complacency of a Briton.

'Marmalade! Bacon!' echoed Mrs. Van Bibber, with blended disgust and contempt in her tones. 'Ah, if I could but have a real old Virginia breakfast, or a Baltimore one

either, dropped down on this table to-morrow. Wouldn't I make you islanders open your eyes!'

'The subject is a fascinating one. What would you give us?'

'Piles of ripe oranges to begin with—such oranges as I've never seen here. I should require several days to show you what we could do in the way of breakfasts. One day I'd give you a tender loin-steak—rare, not done to a cinder—and potatoes stewed in milk; hot rolls and buckwheat cakes. English breakfast tea, of course. I'm free to confess that I prefer it to ours.'

'English breakfast tea! What might that be?'

'Wait till you come to America, and then we'll show you. Iced water—the lukewarm stuff they bring you here is nauseating to me. Another day, fried chicken and waffles, and some corn-bread—"corn dodger," vulgarly speaking.'

'Corn-dodger. It sounds like some kind of patent sieve.'

'Oh, no! There's a story about a southern prisoner in the war, when two ladies went to see him, and one had a bundle of tracts, and the other a basketful of pieces of corn-bread, and they both held out their hands to him at once. The tracts were nearest, but he bowed politely (all *our* men were polite), and said, "I thank you, ma'am, but I'll try a little of this lady's corn-dodger first." Come to Baltimore, and we'll show you a very respectable specimen. *With* fried chicken and waffles—ah, when I see your greasy bacon, and think of fried chicken and waffles, I'm sick. It makes me positively sick.'

'It sounds nice, whatever it may be. Then you are a rebel?' he added, unguardedly.

Mrs. Van Bibber's whole aspect changed. Her insulted southern blood rushed over her face.

'A rebel!' she cried. 'We don't admit the term. They very soon had to cease calling us rebels and admit us as a belligerent power. No, sir! I am not a rebel. I am a southern woman, and I uphold my cause.'

'I beg your pardon, I'm sure.'

'Do you mean,' she added, looking at him curiously, her good-nature all restored, 'that you're a unionist?'

'My sympathies would have been with the north, of course,' Godfrey admitted.

'Of course—but it wasn't so much of course in your country.'

'No, I'm sorry to say it wasn't. But in my part of the world it was, and always will be.'

'Ah, well, I would love to have you to pay a visit to Virginia and our Southern States. I know you'd entirely change your views.'

'There is no telling what I might sacrifice if bribed with such breakfasts as you describe,' said Godfrey, laughing. 'Ah!'—as they turned and saw the tall figure of Giles Barras at the end of the terrace; 'excuse me if I leave you. I have business over there.'

He went to Mr. Barras, and they turned towards the front of the house.

'Well, I've had quite a fight with him,' said Mr. Barras, laughing. 'He proved harder to convince than I had expected. However, I *have* convinced him, and that very thoroughly. I expect he will relieve you of his presence to-morrow morning. If he should not, just drop me a line by the evening post, and I will come again and make it certain.'

'And do you think I made much ado about nothing?'

'On the contrary, I am convinced it was a very good thing that you acted promptly. Had you not done so, he would have gained an advantage, and he was prepared to be quite nasty if he got the chance. But I have extracted his fangs, and he now wriggles in impotent rage.'

'I am delighted that you found such convincing arguments. I cannot tell you how much I feel indebted to you.'

'Not a bit of it. I hope this is but the beginning of our acquaintance. You must give me the pleasure of your company at dinner some evening, if you will.'

Godfrey said he would be delighted.

'I must be off now,' said Mr. Barras. 'I have one or two other calls to make. Good-day. I think you will have a quiet course after to-morrow morning.'

They shook hands laughingly and parted. Mr. Barras climbed into his cart and was soon out of sight round a bend in the drive. Godfrey turned back and went into the house. The excitement was over. Now for the flatness and dulness which always follows it. These had their turn, of course, but Godfrey's was not the temperament to yield to them, or allow them to dominate him. In this respect he was strong—in the power of receiving rebuffs and reverses, pleasures and successes, in much the same calm and impartial spirit. It was assuredly not that he was incapable of feeling pleasure or pain keenly enough, lastingly enough. But there are natures which pleasure and pain, or rather the effects of them, shatter and shake; they leave them trembling and unnerved. Godfrey was different. He

was endowed with something, at any rate, of that rare gift which the poet aspired after when he cried:

'Me . . . standing at ease in nature,

Me, wherever my life is lived. O, to be self-balanced for contingencies,
To confront night, storms, hunger, ridicule, accidents, rebuffs, as the trees and animals do.'

It was thus, to a certain extent, self-balanced for contingencies that this young man faced the world and his fate, and it was from this inward power that proceeded his apparent tranquil acceptance of positions and situations which in the eyes of his mother, at any rate, were derogatory to his dignity, and injurious to the great aim of 'getting on.' Such a gift is not the real thing, unless it holds good in small things as well as in great ones; unless it enables a man with unruffled mien to appear inconsistent while in reality pursuing steadily the one object on which he may have set his mind. All this capacity Godfrey had. He might have some feeling of depression, but it left him practically undisturbed, as he saw Giles depart. Undisturbed, also, he amused himself for the rest of the afternoon, partly in writing a letter to his sisters, giving them some account of the proceedings at Moorside, partly in reading, smoking, strolling about, and incidentally gaining a fine robust appetite for his impending seven o'clock dinner. Punctually the gong sounded for it, and he repaired to his place; found all as it had been the night before—Mrs. Van Bibber by his side, and the rest of the company assembled.

Dr. Burton made his appearance a little late. The calibre of the man came out distinctly in the peculiar circumstances in which he and his opponent were placed. He neither knew how to accept his defeat like a man, and shake hands over it with his conqueror, confessing that he had been wrong, nor had he the faintest notion of how to ignore the whole affair and stand aside in silent dignity. Dignity, indeed, was not in him to be shown, under any possible combination of circumstances. His allies, Mrs. Capstick and the young lady who sat at his left hand, were in their usual places, and were evidently acquainted with the fact that all had not been plain sailing for the object of their admiration, for they inquired audibly and anxiously how he was feeling 'now.' To which he replied, in a pettish and querulous manner, that he was very far from well: he had been worried and agitated that afternoon in no common degree, and that through the agency of those who ought rather to have spared and helped, than troubled and tired him. He had quite

hoped to enjoy an interval of a week or ten days' rest amongst his friends at the establishment before leaving for his holiday, but after what had happened he felt there was no longer any place for him, and he intended to set out to-morrow.

He heaved an angry sigh and cast a malignant glance towards Godfrey as he spoke. Both the ladies loudly expressed their disappointment and indignation—disappointment at his impending departure, indignation at the scurvy treatment to which he had been subjected. None of all this made Godfrey's pulses quicken by so much as the tenth of a beat, nor in any way impaired the excellent appetite given him by his long walk that morning in the keen moorland air. Neither did it in any way increase his pleasure in the prospect of his coming six months' administration at Moorside.

The whole affair had become very disappointing. From an exhilarating prospect of a complete change of work and interests, it had dwindled away into the prosaic reality of a sordid contest with an incompetent and insincere person for the honour of ministering to half a dozen *soi-disant* invalids. Furthermore, these ministrations must, he foresaw, be either a continuation of the present quackery and humbug, or he would have to raise a general disturbance—become detested by all, receive thanks from none—and by the time he should have succeeded in making himself odious all round it would be time for him to go home again and seek fresh work.

Yet a few more disagreeable experiences on the morrow. The retreating physician contrived to fill the whole place with a pervading atmosphere of the injuries he had received. It is a faculty with which some people are gifted to a wonderful extent, a kind of moral aroma which fills the entire air in their neighbourhood. He did not leave until the afternoon, and then, accompanied to the door by his satellite ladies, he took his departure in the 'ark,' as Mrs. Van Bibber dubbed the venerable omnibus of the establishment. She and Godfrey, hardened in their cynical indifference to pain and suffering, were seated at the time of his departure on a bench near the front door.

'Fancy calling that thing an omnibus,' said Mrs. Van Bibber, in a low tone. 'Why, the meanest of our summer resorts would be ashamed to own it for their stage. I tremble for its fate, or rather for the fate of Dr. Burton and his trunks. Are those women going to see him on to the cars, do you think?' she added, in a still lower, apparently awe-struck, tone, as the procession appeared—the head waiter first, carrying the doctor's

smaller packages; then the porter, bearing what Mrs. Van Bibber called his 'trunks'; then Slater, with a peculiar mock-solemn expression; then the victim himself, with a lady on either hand.

'Well, ya know, if my hand gets lamer and lamer while you're away,' cried Mrs. Capstick, 'I shall have to send for you back. I get so awfully nervous, there's no doin' any good with me. And there's so much in believin' in your doctor. It's more than half the battle. Now don't you think it is?'

'Of course it is, Mrs. Capstick. I can only beg you to persevere in the treatment I have prescribed, and under no circumstances consent to any change being made in it.'

'My! How do you feel after that?' whispered Mrs. Van Bibber, gently offering Godfrey her smelling-bottle. And, as no notice was taken of herself or her companion, the hardy Republican uplifted her voice:

'You're never going away without saying good-bye to *me*, doctor! You would not be so ungallant,' cried she, in tones which he could not ignore.

He turned towards them, and lifted his hat, sheepishly.

'I've not had the advantage of your advice,' she continued, 'because I have as much on hand from my London physician as will serve me for the balance of the year, but I shall miss you very badly; and so will Dr. Noble, I fancy, though his acquaintance with you is of such a recent date—eh, Dr. Noble?'

'Certainly,' said Godfrey, smiling.

'There are some people one does not easily forget, after even a short acquaintance. I hope you'll shake hands with me, doctor,' she continued, amiably; and he had unwillingly to diverge from his straightforward professional path, descend the steps, and shake hands, looking red, angry, and embarrassed.

'Yes, I shall miss you,' she repeated, sweetly. 'It will be quite impossible to replace you, though I am sure Dr. Noble will do his best. I wish you a pleasant journey, and I hope you will have a real good time wherever you go.'

She released him, and with a scant salutation on his part to Godfrey, whom he had not once directly addressed since they had parted the morning before, he was at last allowed to enter his chariot and was driven off, not looking quite so important as before Mrs. Van Bibber had bethought herself to wish him good-bye.

Perhaps it was very funny, Godfrey thought. His companion at any rate seemed to find it so, though Godfrey himself failed to see the very humorous side of it.

Mrs. Van Bibber laughed heartily, though not loudly, when the last sign of the omnibus had disappeared down the hill.

'I guess he couldn't quite tell whether I should miss him agreeably or not,' she said. 'I know I'm mighty glad he has gone. I've no use for Dr. Burton no use in the world.'

Godfrey wondered if any one had, except Dr. Burton himself, and then they returned to the house. Things went on exactly as they had done before—and the evening and the morning were the third day.

CHAPTER. XII.

REST AND BE THANKFUL.

BURTON had been gone for twenty-four hours, and Godfrey, entering at once upon his new duties, had indeed found enough to discourage a bold man left to him by his out-of-health predecessor. In the physician's department the most shameless quackery was rampant on every side. Going to see the two ladies who were in their rooms undergoing Dr. Burton's present panacea for all mortal ills whether of mind or body, Godfrey found that one of them was undoubtedly seriously ill physically, and also lost in the profoundest mental depression; nervous and exhausted to the last degree. The questions which he addressed to her nurse and herself elicited facts which quickly proved to the young man that the treatment she was undergoing was not in the least suited to her temperament or constitution. He suspected some serious physical derangement to account for her illness; if he were right, there could be little doubt that she was being every day made worse by what was being done to her. She had arrived at that stage of mental depression in which death appears a welcome, wished-for, and only too unlikely release. The nurse was paid, and expected to carry out the treatment ordered by a qualified medical man, and she did it, but with an air of utter incredulity as to its efficacy. Godfrey sat with the poor lady for a little while, talking to her, and presently she aroused out of her depression so far as to tell him that she felt a great deal worse, coming there, and had lost all hope of ever being better.

'My own physician at home recommended this treatment,' she said, 'and Dr. Burton assured me that it would cure me in six weeks. I was so ill that I was willing to try anything; but

I think I shall go mad in six weeks, or else I shall have jumped out of that window. I cannot bear this much longer.'

'Oh, no; you won't be mad, nor yet will you jump out of the window,' he said, gently. 'And I think you will be well again by-and-by, but not in six weeks.'

'More likely in six months, doctor,' said the nurse, cheerfully.

Godfrey made no reply to this, but rose to leave his patient.

'I should like to see you again to-morrow,' he said. 'I will propose another plan of treatment to you, which I think will very likely do you more good than the present one. You are not strong enough to make much exertion, but you will not get better while you stay in bed and have no fresh air. Would you like me to suggest my plan to you, to-morrow? I will not urge you to do anything that you may not like.'

Her dull, exhausted eyes brightened a little.

'Thank you,' said she. 'I shall be glad to hear what you have to say, but I shall never be better.'

He wished her good-morning, and went away. The nurse followed him out of the room.

'Has she any relations?' he asked.

'Oh yes, sir. There's her husband, who doesn't at all like this treatment for her, and objects to her being shut up so much, but her physician advised her to come here, and she would try it. And when once Dr. Burton had got her into that room, and the treatment in full swing, he simply wrote to Mr. Barton and told him his wife was going on perfectly well. You know, he does believe in it. I'm tired of it,' added the young woman, with a restive look. 'I'd rather do the hardest surgical nursing than one of these no-sort of cases. You've no satisfaction and no variety, and it is such humbug.'

Naturally Godfrey made no comment upon these *ex-officio* strictures, but said:

'I will write to her husband. Come to my consulting-room some time after eight this evening, and I will speak to you again about her; and if she shows the slightest disposition to sit up, or even to get dressed, encourage it by all means. It would do her good. But don't force her to it. Her nerves are in that state that you must be very careful how you manage her.'

He then dismissed her, and proceeded to view the next case. His inmost soul was filled with indignation at the state of things just revealed to him. 'Robbery,' he said to himself—'the most shameful robbery and imposture. Believes in it, does he? Ass, and worse than ass, that he is!'

His next visitation showed a different state of things. Miss Shaw, the patient, was a tiny, fragile, delicate-looking creature scarcely more than a child in appearance, though she was twenty-six years old. There was no accursed mental depression in her case, though she was evidently of a highly sensitive and nervous temperament. She and her nurse were apparently the best of friends, and were shrieking with laughter over the funny book which the nurse was reading aloud. For a few moments after Godfrey's entrance their faces still wore broad smiles as they looked at him. This patient was up, and partially dressed; comfortably seated, or rather buried, in a large armchair which would easily have contained a person three times her size. The book was put down; she greeted Godfrey amiably.

'I heard Dr. Burton had left,' she said. 'He came to say good-bye to me, and to tell me he didn't know how in the world I should get on without him.'

And they both laughed.

'You are much better, I suppose?' Godfrey said to her with becoming gravity.

'Oh no, I'm not,' was the decisive reply. 'I'm no worse, but I am certainly no better. I'm just exactly the same as I was when I came, nearly six weeks ago. I have just the same raging headaches: I sleep just as badly; I don't eat one scrap more than I used to do, and I don't weigh an ounce more, for all their rubbing and all their milk and mutton. Do I, nurse?'

'Not a grain,' replied nurse, cheerfully.

'Then why remain here?' he asked.

'Oh, it is to please mother. She wants me so much to be well, and my doctor advised this treatment. It is the fashion now, and he was quite tired of me and my stupid bad health. It is a splendid relief for him, you know—to order me off to be shut up for six weeks—and takes a lot of trouble off his hands. Mother believes in him, so she was wild for me to try it. But I shall never be well in this world. I've known that for a long time, and made up my mind to it. In fact, the only thing that keeps me from being almost satisfied with my lot is poor mother. She hates to see me ill. But won't she be glad to see me back again, well or ill!'

'So you make the best of this?'

'Yes. I grudge the money that it will cost mother. I wouldn't mind so much if there was any good to be got out of it, but it's all such a cheat. Otherwise it has been rather amusing here. We have read such a lot of books. Nurse says

it has been quite a holiday for her. And we have so enjoyed circumventing Dr. Burton.'

'Sh—sh!' exclaimed the nurse, in mock-alarm, while Miss Shaw leaned her head back and broke into a peal of laughter.

'How did you manage to circumvent him?' asked Godfrey, laughing too. It was refreshing to find that any amusement could be extracted from any part of this solemn humbug about resting and feeding and all the rest of it.

'Oh, in fifty ways. He cannot make me do anything I don't approve of, though he is so big and I am so small. Part of this wonderful system, you know, is that you don't have any medicine. You are rubbed, and you rest, and then you get hungry of your own accord, and eat enough to serve three strong men. Well, I was rubbed, and I rested, and I did not get one bit hungry. I never am hungry. I eat to keep myself alive, not because I ever wish for food. So he said I must have tonics—drugs which he had told me were so pernicious! Such a lot of tonics! Look at the bottles!' she continued, gleefully, pointing to a row of empty ones on the mantelpiece. 'All those have been made up by Dr. Burton's own skilful hands, and the labels put on them: one table-spoonful, two table-spoonsful, or whatever it was. Nurse always put out the dose at the appointed time, and—emptied it out of the window. I hope the grass has benefited by my tonics. I came here to try their precious treatment. I've read all about it, and I was determined to have it unadulterated, if I had it at all. None of their medicines for me! So pray don't trouble yourself to order any for me.'

'I think the best thing I could do would be to order you home, as too refractory for me to manage,' he said, trying to look grave.

'Oh, no, no! When the sixth week of the treatment is entered upon, you know, I shall find, according to Dr. Burton, that a miracle has taken place. I shall be quite strong and well, with a large appetite, and muscles and sinews like—like his own. Then I am to go downstairs, and sit at the table, and show every one what the "rest treatment" can do for one who had long been considered a hopeless invalid.' She laughed a wicked little laugh. 'And I'm going to do it. I am eagerly looking forward to it. Yes, I must testify in my own person to the infallibility of the "rest treatment."'

'You shall,' said Godfrey, laughing. 'And I do not think I need trouble you with many visits.'

'Oh, do come, sometimes, just to relieve the stupidity of

sitting up here alone,' she urged him. 'Besides, it is your duty to come and see how strong I am growing. Good-morning. I see you believe in the "rest-cure" as much as I do.'

He departed, shaking his head after he had left his room.

'If this is the kind of thing they do to fill up the place, I fear I shall never do for them,' he said to himself. 'I suppose each of those women, or her relatives, will have to pay between fifty and sixty pounds for six weeks of this monstrous quackery. Miss Shaw may get off with the money-loss. She diagnosed her own case correctly enough. But that poor Mrs. Barton will be, unless I'm much mistaken, an invalid, and an expensive one, for many a month to come, and her illness will have been aggravated extremely by what she has gone through here. It may put funds into the company's coffers, but it isn't honest.'

And here another thought struck him too. Was it honest of the physicians who had ordered these two ladies to go and try the new and fashionable treatment, thus to leave them to the mercies of an incompetent fool like Dr. Burton, without first ascertaining what manner of man it was to whom the administration of the said treatment was entrusted: whether he had tact and discrimination enough to see and decide where it should be applied in its fulness, where modified to suit the case, and, most important of all, where it was unsuited to be practised at all? A very unpleasant question, thought Godfrey, who resolved to inform Mr. Barras of all that he had discovered, and leave him to make what use he thought fit of the information.

This was the best conclusion he was able to arrive at in his own mind. Being young, conscientious, and not anxious above all other things for his own ease and comfort, he could not feel satisfied until he had written a letter to the husband of Mrs. Barton, clearly stating what conclusions he had arrived at with regard to her, and advising him to come over and fetch his wife away at the earliest possible opportunity. He named the specialist to whom in his opinion she ought at once to be taken, and then he breathed more freely. He hoped that in a few days poor Mrs. Barton would no longer be lying at Moorside, to be experimented on by a 'scientific fool' at imminent risk to her life or her reason, or both.

It had been a hard day, not so much in actual work as in mental wear and tear, but it was with a sense of relief that he retired to rest, feeling that, however bad things might be, he had put them in train for being altered for the better.

CHAPTER XIII.

MISS ALIZON AGAIN.

He had had time to fall into a sound, refreshing sleep, and was dreamlessly unconscious of all troubles or annoyances, past, present, or to come, when a prolonged and persevering knocking at his door at last succeeded in arousing him. Sleepy, confused, and puzzled, he listened to it vaguely for a few minutes, and then at last, taking in the meaning of it, sprang out of bed and went to the door. The night-porter stood outside.

'Ye're wanted, sir, at once, at Mesther Blundell's,' he informed Godfrey.

'At Mr. Blundell's? Who on earth is Mr. Blundell?'

'Mesther Blundell has sent for you. T' butler's downstairs, and he says as it's very urgent.'

Gathering from this statement that the patient was not any one in the house, and seeing that it was useless to question the present messenger any further, Godfrey said:

'Well, go and tell him I will be down in five minutes, and of course he must wait to show me the way.'

He then made a hasty dressing, and glancing at his watch found it was half-past one in the morning. He was wide-awake now, and ran quickly downstairs. In the hall he found a man standing, and on the bench near him rested a lighted lanthorn. He bowed and stepped forward when he saw Godfrey.

'Are you the messenger who has come for me?'

'From Mr. Blundell's—yes, sir. My master was taken very ill half an hour ago, and I was to bring Dr. Burton as quickly as possible. We did not know Dr. Burton had left. It's one of Mr. Blundell's attacks that he has sometimes. His 'eart, I believe.'

'Another affection of the heart,' thought Godfrey, with a grim smile; but, putting two and two together, he bade the man wait a moment while he repaired to the consulting-room, and from his store of drugs extracted a tiny packet which he put into his waistcoat pocket, and returned to the hall, telling the man he was ready.

Picking up the lanthorn, the servant led the way out. The door was closed after them by the porter, and, once out of doors, Godfrey began to wonder why the lanthorn should have been brought, for there was a superb moon in the sky, almost at the full, which poured over the whole earth a flood of light almost as clear as that of day. He was soon, however, to learn

the reason why of the lanthorn's presence. They left the grounds by the gate giving upon the road that led to the railway-station. On the other side of this road, it will be remembered, was a wood—not such an extensive wood as that which stretched between Moorside and the house of Giles Barras, but still distinctly a wood, not a mere shrubbery or plantation. Godfrey had once or twice noticed a gate, leading into an avenue which seemed to lose itself in or behind this wood. But they did not go so far down the road as to the avenue. There was a little, unobtrusive-looking gate, leading into what seemed like a woodland path. Into this they turned, and the lanthorn now began to be of sensible use. By-and-by the woodland path ended—or continued, it was difficult to say which—by going under an arched stone tunnel, the entrance of which was almost concealed by trails of ivy, branches of fern, and other green things.

'The tunnel is by far the shortest way, sir, if you don't mind the darkness,' said the servant. 'I'll go first if you will follow me. It is a very good path, and you will get no harm.'

'All right!' said Godfrey; but he almost rubbed his eyes, and repressed a laugh of amusement. Quarter of an hour ago he had been sound asleep in his bed. Now he was plunging into the utter darkness of a subterranean passage on a small scale, with an unknown man, carrying a lanthorn for his guide. He did not, however, ask any questions, but followed his conductor silently and quickly through the damp, resounding passage, from which they at last emerged into the moonlight again for a short space, then plunged into another ivy-hung, fern-draped portal, from which they seemed to come again into the original woodland path.

'To the left, please, sir,' said the man. 'The other road goes to the fish-ponds.'

A few paces more brought them suddenly round a corner into a broad open space of gravel and green lawn. All round about the wood rose dark, but directly in front of them, illuminated by the brilliant moonlight, slept the most beautiful old house Godfrey had ever seen. He could scarcely help lingering to look at it even on this hurried errand to the relief of the sick. It was a broad old grey stone mansion, of the kind so often found in Lancashire and Yorkshire, with a fine projecting wing at either side; the middle retreating between these wings, except where a perfect cavern of a porch stood out. Broad low mullioned windows, fine and smooth turf near the house, and well-kept flower-beds in which just now all the

sweet spring flowers were folded up fast asleep, pallid under the moonlight, showed the beautiful old Tudor house (for it was chiefly Tudor, though a portion of it was still older) to the utmost advantage.

'Fancy this being but a stone's-throw from Moorside!' thought Godfrey; and then he began to wonder what kind of human beings so beautiful a building might shelter. The highly respectable butler opened the front door and ushered Godfrey into a great square hall, in keeping with the rest of the place. A light burnt in it, but no living soul was to be seen.

'Would you take a seat for a moment, sir?' said the man, who laid his lanthorn down, and went quickly upstairs.

Godfrey had just time to observe these stairs, a broad, shallow flight of old black oak, going from the middle of the hall, and branching off to right and left. A superb old house, he perceived very clearly, even in this dim light. Everything about it spoke of wealth and abundance; perfect appointments, and ample means wherewith to keep them up.

By the time he had arrived at that conclusion he became aware of a faint, a very faint rustling on the stairs, and, looking quickly in that direction, saw a woman in a white wrapper, just leaving the last step and coming towards him. Godfrey stood up, silent, and, it must be confessed, tongue-tied. She looked very different, in this loose white gown, from the trimly dressed young lady he had first seen; her full face had not been indicated by her profile; she was hardly at all like what he had expected she would be when he should see her again, but his spirit, if not his outward eye, recognised her instantly. It was Miss Alizon, whom he had seen in a glimpse, in the flash of an eye, as she drove rapidly away from the station, three days ago. Of all the events of this, to him, most strangely eventful night, Godfrey never forgot one; and the particular thing which he always recalled with an intense keenness and vividness, as strong almost as when he had first experienced it, was the mighty throb of delight and joy which his heart gave in that one moment, when his eye fell upon her and he knew her again.

'You are Dr. Noble?' she said. Yes, it was the same voice.

'Yes. You sent for me?'

'Yes. My brother has been taken suddenly ill. He suffers from *angina*. Perhaps you can do something to relieve him. Will you come upstairs?'

'I thought it might be *angina* from what your servant said. I think I shall perhaps be able to give him some relief.'

He spoke in as brief and business-like a tone as she did herself. But, as he followed her upstairs, along the wide low passages, and into a rather small, dark, oak-panelled room, his heart was as exultant as if he had suddenly found a great treasure. He did not pause to ask himself why. He did not remark within himself that he had never in all his life felt like this before, or turn his mind for one moment to the reflection that it was an absurd kind of possession which had suddenly seized upon him. He followed her quickly moving white figure, along those dark old passages, and simply went through the experience of a sudden great joy; he knew all at once that life was a great thing, and that there were feelings and emotions in it which he had never even dreamed of before. Troubles and anxieties, no matter of what nature, seemed to dwindle into the background, and become small and trivial. It was a very strange sensation; he did not stop to analyse it, but yielded to it without question or debate.

People who built houses at the time at which this old dwelling had been erected, did not waste much space on the bedrooms. It was by no means a spacious chamber into which Godfrey followed Miss Blundell; and a huge, antique oak bed devoured most of the superficial area of the room. In the bed a young man was lying—the patient—'my brother,' the Mr. Blundell to whose assistance he had been summoned. He was suffering from a severe attack, of the kind to which the victims of *angina pectoris* are subject.

'Was he awake when this came on?' asked Godfrey, taking the nerveless cold hand, and putting his fingers on the pulse.

'No. His servant sleeps in a bed in his dressing-room. He had seen him asleep before he went to bed himself; he was awake when he heard him move and groan. Then he came in and found him like this. It is half an hour ago.'

'Will you give me a pocket-handkerchief?' said Godfrey to Miss Blundell, and in a moment she had placed one in his hand.

He took from his pocket the little phial he had brought with him, and dropping some of the contents upon the handkerchief, held it to the sick man's face. In a minute, or less, the latter began to show symptoms of recovery and relief. The drawn rigid pallor, and horribly haggard and deathlike appearance which he had worn, changed into a more natural hue and aspect. His breathing grew gradually easier, a red colour returned to his lips, and by-and-by he opened his eyes. As this transformation took place, Godfrey intently watching his

patient, was enabled to see that his natural aspect, and that which he must wear when not thus suffering, was that of a very pretty fellow. He was tall—that the young man could see—and had a broad, well-knit frame to boot, and an extremely handsome face, pale in complexion, with fine dark eyes and eyebrows, and a mass of silky hair, nearly black. Godfrey guessed that he could not be more than thirty years old, and pity took possession of him; for he knew that the disease, of which such attacks as this formed a symptom, was one that always, in the end, kills.

Except for the laboured breathing of the patient, all was quite still and silent. A man-servant was standing a little in the background. Miss Blundell was at the other side of the bed opposite to Godfrey; her hands rested lightly on the cover, and she leaned forward, watching what took place with an intense, concentrated attention and gravity, which Godfrey quickly noted, and which almost seemed to stop her very breathing. Mr. Blundell had at first, of course, looked more like a dead man than one alive; there was a great stillness over everything, and yet Godfrey, whose pulses beat more quickly, and whose nervous susceptibility was perhaps acuter than usual, as it well might be, was vividly conscious of an intense, strong, ardent vitality somewhere near him.

There are persons whose mere presence in the same room gives this sensation,—that in their neighbourhood one is in the midst of life, whether death is nigh or not. Godfrey knew—he understood it all in those moments of intense, passionately strung, emotional life, which flew by as if they had been winged by lightning, and which yet were so laden with feeling and experience that they seemed an eternity compressed into five minutes. During these moments he grasped the fact that this strong, unquenchable force which was near was not contained within the frame of this patient lying in the grasp of the horrible 'breast-pang' which would, sooner or later, end his days; it was not, either, the quiet, well-trained domestic, who stood like a statue in the background, awaiting any order that might be given him; it was not he himself, Godfrey Noble, from whom radiated that intangible but most real influence. It was none of them, but it was that white-robed woman, of no remarkable stature or dimensions; not very beautiful to look upon in face or form, though she was striking. She it was who diffused this atmosphere of strong, throbbing life and power throughout the room. Godfrey knew it, and felt his own mental and spiritual powers strengthened and quickened, not dominated by contact

with it. She said nothing while he was administering the drug, but, as has been said, watched closely and intently all that took place, and then, as she saw the returning animation in her brother's face, she looked across at Godfrey, and asked quietly:

'Is that nitrite of amyl that you are giving him?'

'Yes, precisely.'

'Well, I have some. We have it in the house. I tried it. Why didn't it do?'

'I cannot tell you, I'm sure. Perhaps you did not hit upon just the right quantity. It isn't a thing to meddle with unless you know all about it.'

She was silent, dropping her eyes to her brother's face again. He presently turned his head, looked languidly round, and fixing his eyes upon her, said:

'Alizon!'

'Yes, Peregrine, I am here. You are better now, are you not?'

'Yes, I feel a lot better now. It was a pretty bad turn that time. I thought I was done for.'

He laughed a little; a queer, little, quiet, low laugh, not altogether pleasing to Godfrey's ears. And then, turning his head round, his eyes fell full upon his physician. He looked at him for a perceptible time in perfect silence. Then:

'Halloa! It isn't Burton. Who are you?' he asked, coolly.

'I am your medical attendant at the present moment,' replied Godfrey, with equal *sang-froid*. 'He will be all right now,' he added, turning to Miss Blundell. 'Does he often have them?'

'Sometimes he has none at all for a long time. Sometimes he has one, and it is over. Sometimes he has several at short intervals. But they are seldom so violent or last so long as this.'

Peregrine had been looking at Godfrey all this time, and now asked, abruptly:

'Are you the new doctor, then, who was to go to that cold-water shop?'

'Yes—if you like to call it so.'

'I'm only calling it what it is,' replied Mr. Blundell, with a grim smile. 'Cold water and cold mutton; cold baths and cold comfort of every sort—except for the doctor. Burton knows how to take care of himself.'

'It is well if he knows how to do anything properly; but

come, you must be very much better to talk in this way,' said his sister, very decidedly. 'There's no need to keep Dr. Noble here, and deprive him of any more of his night's rest, if he's satisfied with your condition. Can't you leave me some of that stuff?' she added, pointing to the phial.

'No, not that,' replied Godfrey. 'I'll leave you a dose or two of something else, though, if you can oblige me with a small bottle of any kind. Then, if he should be attacked again, which is not likely, you can give it to him as I will direct you.'

'If I should be attacked again,' observed the patient, in a slightly nasal, and not very contented tone, 'I shall just send for you back at once, Dr.—, Dr.— what is your name?'

'My name is Noble—Godfrey Noble. And I'm a surgeon, not a physician.'

'What's the difference, pray?' grumbled Mr. Blundell.

'A great deal of difference, you goose,' said his sister. 'When you reflect that Burton is a full-blown M.D., you ought to perceive the difference instantly.'

'One drop of that, in water, ought to have the same effect upon him as what I gave him just now,' Godfrey said, handing her the bottle.

She turned, and presented it to the servant.

'You hear that, Wilson? Please to remember it, and take that bottle into your own charge,' she ordered him; and Godfrey seemed again to hear her saying to the porter at the railway-station, 'Yes, please, Nuttall, at once.'

'I need not stay any longer, I think,' he remarked, looking round; 'you will do wisely to take it easily to-morrow,' (to Peregrine) 'good-night,—no, good-morning, I believe it is now.'

'Good-morning,' Miss Blundell said, civilly, but not offering to shake hands with him, or to leave the bedside.

Godfrey went towards the door, but was re-called by the voice of his patient.

'I say, doctor, come in to-morrow morning. Now don't forget.'

'I really do not think there will be any need.'

'Hang the need! I particularly desire that you will come. I want to speak to you.'

'Oh, I can come, if you wish it. I'll call between twelve and one.'

This time he was suffered to depart without let or hindrance. The man-servant, 'Wilson,' took him downstairs and there he found the butler with the lanthorn, who again lighted him

along the queer, tunnelled path to the road, where he left him and returned to the house. Godfrey took his way back to Moorside, or rather in the direction of Moorside. But his mind was quite engrossed with his recent experience. Was it a strange experience, or was it merely a very commonplace sort of affair? At any rate, he felt not the slightest inclination to make any great haste: to desert the outside beauty of the night and the moonlight, and the solemn stillness, and return to put himself within the four walls of the house; to go to his room and his bed. It was now, he found, on looking at his watch, half-past two, and the night, or rather morning, was unchanged, save for the slight decline in the moon. He deliberately chose the longest way to the house, and with his arms folded across his chest, while he slowly stepped along the stony, uphill road, he gave himself up to reflections upon what had passed.

After all, there was nothing so very extraordinary in it; nothing that might not have been almost expected to happen to the only medical man in a small country place. A midnight summons to a sick man; a household, part of whom had been roused from their sleep in the urgency of the occasion; the dangerous condition of the sick man, who might as easily as not have died during that prolonged and terrible spasm of the heart, but who did not die; the said sick man's sister, quiet, calm, and self-possessed, watching the doctor as he applied his remedies, and watching too the relief they procured for the invalid; a request that he would call again; a promise from him to do so, —and good-morning. All commonplace and unexciting enough so far as the circumstances went. It was the feelings called into play, it was the people to whom these things had happened, which made the importance of the scene, as it nearly always is with all events.

Commonplace or not, Godfrey knew, without arguing it out, that it had been by far the most important thing that had ever happened to him in his whole career. It had given wings to his spirit; had made him feel as he never had felt before. He had his rejoicing to himself. There was not a soul in the wide world to whom he could ever confide a word of it, unless—but he did not project his thoughts into the future. They were here—occupied, and very much occupied, with the present; with the past also, but not a more distant past than an hour would cover. He was very much alone, as we all are in moments of supreme sorrow or supreme joy—alone with his God and with his own thoughts. At this moment he asked not a further

boon of life or fate. He had found that which he had lacked; he perhaps could not have said exactly what it was. Certainly, an hour ago he could not, if he had been waking and speculatiug instead of sleeping, have defined what it was that was needed to his life, to give him the sense he now had of completeness and satisfaction. But it had come—that unknown, indefinable something; it was there; he had got it. It might not always give him joy—dimly he felt that—but the difference there had been an hour or two ago, when he had perhaps not even known that he lacked it, and now, that he knew he possessed it!

He wandered over the moor for a good while, but at last returned to the house, got himself admitted, and went to his room again. The blind was up. It was growing less brilliantly clear and light, but there was still enough of the illumination left to show his face plainly to any one who had been there to see. If Letty or Hilda could have beheld their brother then, as he stood by the window and looked across the moonlit valley, she would perhaps have wondered who the stranger might be. Both the girls knew a quiet, kindly, undemonstrative young fellow, who never refused them a favour, never gave them a rough word, never put his own comfort or indulgence before theirs—a brother who plodded on in a painstaking kind of way, without ever having anything much to show in return for his pains—so they felt. But this was something quite different; this was a young man who looked as if he had never felt anything but the most complete command of life and circumstances; a favourite of fortune, with a regal look in his eyes, and a smile which spoke of success and of the habit of easily winning all he wished to gain. Thus must Fortunatus have looked when his magic purse made him practically master of the world and of all the good it had to give.

He stood before the wiudow for a little while, his head bent, and his hand before his face. His lips did not move, nor any speech come from them, but a prayer and a thanksgiving both ascended at that moment, along with all the other prayers, sighs, moans, thanks, hymns, and *Misereres* which were going up just then in a thick cloud towards the heavens. If, amongst the multitudes of these cries of grief and joy, of rapture and of appeal, which by night and by day never cease to go up, some are more buoyant and ascend more quickly and more purely than others, surely these thoughts of Godfrey Noble that night must have sped upwards on wings of joy and swiftness.

CHAPTER XIV.

AT GREAT UNDERMOOR.

In accordance with the common experience that after for the first time hearing or seeing something that greatly interests us we repeatedly and very soon afterwards hear many further particulars of it, Godfrey was destined at once to learn more details concerning the Blundell *ménage* than he yet knew; which, indeed, was not surprising, seeing he was absolutely ignorant of everything regarding it. Had he been a gossip, he might indeed have heard many wonderful things, for it was Slater who addressed him on the subject on the following morning after breakfast. Slater had, of course, been told by the night-porter that Godfrey had been sent for, and whither.

They were in the office; Godfrey having gone there to ask about some business details connected with his post. These Slater only half communicated, and then plunged into the topic near his heart.

'I hear you were called up last night,' he began, in very much the same tone which he might have employed to Burton, who was one of the people who are quick to perceive undue familiarity, and who writhe under it, but who have not the faintest notion how to check it. Godfrey, however, was of another calibre.

'Yes,' was all he said.

'Mr. Blundell very bad?' asked Slater, colloquially.

'It is not usual to discuss one's patients with outsiders,' said Godfrey with a slight smile, which, however, savoured of anything but urbanity.

'Well, no, I suppose not,' said Slater, who was not easily rebuffed. 'But it's common property, you know — Mr. Blundell's illness. It's two years now since he began to be so ill, and they always send here for temporary help, though I believe he goes occasionally to the big London doctors.'

Godfrey made no reply to this. He was waiting for further information on the subject he had been inquiring about.

But Slater had begun to chatter, and for a certain time he must go on chattering, after the manner of his kind, unless he should be forcibly interrupted. So far the moment for doing that did not appear to Godfrey to have arrived.

'It's a sad pity for a man of his age—he's only just over thirty—to be tied by the leg as he is by such an illness. He

has no pleasure in life—can't ride, or hunt, or drive, or walk, or do any of the things that a young fellow like him wants to do; at least, not without great danger. That's bad enough, though they do say it is not without its compensations in some other ways.'

Here Slater looked portentously impenetrable.

'What about this case of drugs then? How much longer is it going to be delayed, do you suppose?'

'He would like to fling more of a loose leg than he does, under the circumstances, but they say Miss Blundell won't let him.'

Godfrey drummed his fingers on the table.

'It gives her the mastery, at any rate, that affair of his,' Slater went on; and Godfrey, in the midst of his impatience, gathered that it was not Mr. Blundell's heart-disease to which reference was being made. 'Yes, it gives her the mastery, and she enjoys that. She does pretty much as she pleases, does Miss Blundell, now that they have taken to keeping house together. They have lots of money, and of course he can't spend much on himself, being so confined as he is. And she is rich, too.'

'I don't want to hear about that, but about my box of medicines,' said Godfrey, with an irritated feeling. What a place this was! Quackery in the head, gossip and scandal amongst the inferiors. He felt as if he would like to crush Slater like something unclean. He rose, looking very uncompromising.

'Ah, but they are quite the first people about here, the Blundells,' said Slater, eagerly. 'A very old family. It is a strange tale. That old house of theirs is a great deal thought of by antiquarians, and lots of people who come here are wild to get a sight of it. Only they are never satisfied—that's the worst of people,' he continued, forgetting his hinted mystery in a fresh topic. 'Mr. Blundell—they say his sister made him do it, but I know nothing about that—anyhow, a few years ago he threw open the grounds one day in a fortnight, or one day in a week, I think it was, and people were allowed to walk in a certain portion of them, and round the fish-ponds, which are well worth seeing, and so on. But they weren't contented with that. They would calmly go and ring the bell, and ask to see the old oak. As if the house wasn't a mass of old oak!' said Slater, working himself into a state of virtuous indignation and sympathy with the injured Blundells. 'And it got to be a perfect nuisance. It's the way with some people. Give 'em an inch, and they take a mile; they ain't contented with a

yard. So Mr. Blundell got into a rage—he has a temper, though his sister manages to keep it within bounds for him—and shut it up, and said he wasn't going to have his privacy invaded. And not a soul has been admitted since, try as hard as they would, except a party from here who went one day, and by accident encountered Miss Blundell in the drive, and she was dressed—as she sometimes is, about home, you know, very plainly. They hadn't the sense to see what she was, but took her for some menial, and she played them a trick, and pretended to be the housekeeper's niece, or something, and showed them a good deal, but quite bewildered them by some of the things she told them. They would never have known if she hadn't met a visitor just as she was showing them out, who spoke to her; and they *were* undeceived then, I can tell you. So Mr. Blundell wasn't very bad last night?'

'Was he not?' replied Godfrey, suppressing a smile. 'I have wasted just ten minutes in listening to this, and have got no answer to my question. If you do not know, will you tell me where I can find some one who does?'

Slater laughed.

'Ah, you are not to be caught tripping, I perceive. You come from a different place to this. You see we all know each other's concerns here. Dr. Burton always used to tell me where he had been and all about his patients.'

'Indeed!' said Godfrey, calmly, and not betraying the fact that he was even now about to make his way again to see Mr. Blundell. At the door, however, he paused and looked back.

'What is the name of Mr. Blundell's place?' he asked.

'Undermoor—Great Undermoor,' replied Slater, eagerly communicative. 'It used to be just Undermoor Hall: and it is Undermoor Hall now, by rights, but the lower house, when it was built, was called Little Undermoor, and so Mr. Blundell's is Great Undermoor.'

'Thank you; I now comprehend fully,' said Godfrey, as he left the room, this time not to turn back.

It was twelve o'clock when he again took his way to Undermoor. This time he could not enter by the covered way. He must go round by the high road, in the ordinary manner. He soon found the gates and the lodge, which he had already noticed two or three times, and which he now knew belonged to what Mrs. Van Bibber would have called 'the Blundell mansion.' He opened the side-gate, followed the smoothly rolled drive, and soon found himself in front of the same beautiful old house which he had seen last night in what now hung in his

memory like a vision. Then a white and pallid moonlight, fit illuminator of such an expedition, had lighted it. Now it basked in the fresh yet genial warmth of a bright April morning. But he would have known it again anywhere, in any light, or at any hour; and it is not always that we can recognise our dream-houses, much less our dream-persons, under the disillusioning light of day. With regard to the house, Godfrey felt he had been successful; he wondered, as he pulled the bell, whether he should likewise be so with regard to the people.

So far as the butler was concerned it was all right. Despite the demure, blank propriety of his daylight demeanour, he was the veritable messenger who had carried the lanthorn, and had led Godfrey by such strange paths to the house. So far, so good. The young man was ushered in the first instance into what he saw must be the drawing-room, a wonderful quaint apartment, very large, and rather low, with deep embayed window-seats, curious coloured walls, either painted or stained with a weird-looking heraldic device in red and blue. A noble white marble mantelpiece, cunningly and beautifully carved, reached high up the wall. The room was full of dim old furniture, faded ancient tapestry, and curiosities in the shape of tables, cabinets and figures, some of which he saw must be both remarkable and valuable. It was a pleasant room, with the sun streaming into it, and Godfrey sat very contentedly in the profound silence, till the butler reappeared with the request that he would step upstairs.

The room to which he was taken was not that in which he had seen his patient the night before. It might be near it, or it might not; but this was a small oak-panelled room, furnished as a smoke-room, or study, or snuggery, or all three. It certainly looked the picture of comfort, if not of splendour, with its warm Persian rugs, its deep easy-chairs and luxurious-looking divan, and all modern conveniences brightening and contrasting with its sombre panels, low roof, and broad, deep window. Godfrey took all this in at glance as he entered. He had had heard voices before he went in, and he found assembled together his patient, his patient's sister, and Giles Barras. Young Blundell was half-lying down on a big couch, close to a small bright fire. He looked white and invalidish, though very much awake and alive. Barras was half-sitting, half-leaning on the edge of the centre table, and Alizon sat in a chair by the window, sewing away with great energy and diligence at what looked like a rather large and coarse piece of work.

As Godfrey came forward, Mr. Blundell exclaimed, fervently, 'Thank God!' His sister lifted her head, looked at the new-comer, and, without smile or movement, indifferently wished him good-morning. Giles Barras came up to him, and smiled a welcome, shook hands, and said, heartily, 'How-do-you-do?'

'Sit down here, doctor!' said Blundell, pointing to a place near to him. 'If you are not in a great hurry, give us your company for a little while, and when these two people have gone you can tell me how I am. I had a splendid sleep after you left, and yet I don't feel very lively this morning.'

'Don't you? I'm sorry,' said Godfrey, sitting down.

Giles Barras accosted him again, laughing.

'So your friend has taken himself off at last, I hear.'

'He went away; yes. He waited till the following afternoon, but he is now gone,' replied Godfrey.

'And you are free to carry out what reforms you please?'

'The best reform in this case,' said Miss Blundell, speaking at this juncture, 'would be to pull the place down, cart away every stick and stone, and put a plantation of young firs on the place on which it stood.'

Peregrine laughed sarcastically.

Godfrey noticed how suddenly still Giles Barras became when she spoke; how he listened, not overtly, but still to Godfrey visibly not with his ears only, but with every fibre of him. But he did not turn and look at her.

'Moorside does not find favour in your eyes,' said Godfrey, inquiringly.

'It never did,' she answered, still sewing rapidly.

'Miss Blundell has never forgiven me for taking it up when I did,' said Giles, looking towards her for a moment with a kind of smile.

'No,' she answered, 'I can't forgive any one who is so fond as to be mixed up with a crazy place like that. They are all crazy there, from beginning to end: patients, doctors—saving your presence, you are a new-comer, and will soon find them out—promoters, and the whole crew of them. It is an insult to have such a place staring at one every time one wants to have a look across the hills.'

'Oh, I assure you it is by no means altogether crazy,' said Godfrey. 'It has its faults, but it also has its good side.'

'I don't believe there is any good thing about it. Stupid place! It isn't worth talking about.'

'Nothing is worth talking about if one will only admit that it has one side,' he said, slightly smiling. She raised her face

and her eyes, and looked at him with an expression more inquiring than surprised. It was an expression that seemed to say, 'I have decided that there can be but one opinion on this subject; why do you contradict me?'

Giles Barras planted himself more firmly on the table and laughed; a laugh which was echoed by Peregrine Blundell. Both men were evidently vastly diverted at this discussion, if discussion it could be called. Godfrey suddenly remembered what Mr. Barras had said to him about the soothing influence upon us of some of our friends, and how he had taken up the cause of the establishment partly because one of his friends was obstinately opposed to it. Here was an explanation of the remark. This was the friend who wielded such a soothing influence over him.

'Here's some one who doesn't agree with you, Alizon,' said Giles, politely, and he looked at her.

'It wouldn't be the first time I had met with such a person,' was the provoking reply.

Godfrey smiled now, not in the least abashed or abased by her rudeness, for rudeness it was, and she said nothing to soften down her words, but continued to sew quickly, steadily, and perseveringly. Her brother and her friend were both looking at her, and Godfrey took the freedom of looking at her too, during the little silence which supervened on her last words.

What he saw was not a large or imposing figure, but one just reaching middle height (as he had seen last night)—slender rather than stout, though she was not thin; agreeably, rather than finely proportioned. It was true, there was something very pleasing and harmonious in the lines of her form: the same thing had struck Godfrey when he had first seen her standing on the platform of the little railway-station. Her complexion—fair, and originally colourless—had been tanned by a good deal of outdoor life. Had she made any pretensions to being a beauty she would never have allowed that tan to spread itself so strongly over her skin, and give such a peculiar effect as was produced by its contrast with her yellow hair, and clear, rather light-grey eyes. Her eyebrows were darker than her hair, and very well defined; these, with dark eyelashes, somewhat mitigated the decidedly peculiar effect of the aforementioned brown face and yellow hair. Her hands were well-shaped, and they, too, were as brown as berries. She wore one ring only—a curious, old-fashioned one, a large rose of diamonds of great beauty; this was on the little finger of her right hand. She had on the gown she had worn when Godfrey

had first seen her; some kind of a thin, soft woollen stuff, probably made by a tailor, to judge from its plainness, neatness of finish, and good fit. It was of a soft, silvery grey in hue, and, abstractly considered, was not too well suited to her complexion and general colouring. But Godfrey did not think of that; and scarcely any one did think of that, or of things like that, in regard to Alizon Blundell, who was one of the rare persons who are themselves, independently of any dress, any style, or any colours which they may wear. One might look at her dress, or he might not; at any rate he quickly passed from that to her face, and, seeing it, did not forget it; heard her voice, and remembered it always; heard what she had to say, and, ten to one, disliked both the manner and the matter of it, but probably did not hate her for saying it. Those only whom she did not notice were indifferent to her, and not always they. Such was the woman with whom Godfrey Noble had fallen in love at first sight, or very nearly so. It was not till afterwards that he learned what she could be, when she chose, in the lives of others, but he was very certain already what she was in his. For her part, she did not look at him, save for a moment when she had to address or reply to him, and took no manner of notice of him. It was not, as he knew instinctively, from hauteur or exclusiveness that this indifference arose. He had not begun to ask himself yet from what it came.

'I was on my way to call upon you,' Mr. Barras said, breaking the silence, and speaking to Godfrey. 'I hope you will soon come and dine with me. To-day is Saturday. Could you come early next week?'

'Yes, with pleasure. So far as I know, all my evenings are my own at Moorside, and I have no acquaintances here, so your convenience can be mine.'

'Well, I want these good people to come as well,' said Giles, turning to the brother and sister. 'Alizon, on which evening will you honour me so far?'

'I should say the most reasonable plan would be for Dr. Noble to say when, or if Peregrine may go at all.'

'Do put that sewing down for a few minutes,' Giles had begged her before Godfrey could speak, and in a voice which betrayed a certain amount of irritation. She looked up with a sudden, gleaming smile, full of malice and mockery.

'How like a lazy, do-nothing man! This that I am making now is the new apron which I have long ago wanted so badly for gardening and feeding the fowls, and chopping off dead flowers, and a hundred other things. It is almost done now, and when it is done I shall give over sewing at it, of course.'

'It would be such a relief to see you for once with your hands before you.'

'If we come to dine with you, you will see that same. It will be something for you to look forward to.'

'What do you say, Dr. Noble?' asked Giles.

'What do I say would be nearer the mark,' interposed Peregrine. 'And I say that Tuesday evening will suit very well—that is, if it will do for the doctor.'

Godfrey waited a moment to hear whether the lady had anything further to say in the matter, and, as she did not speak, he said it would suit him very well.

'Is that decided, then, Alizon?' asked her would-be host.

'It seems so,' she replied, calmly.

'You certainly can accept an invitation about as ungraciously as any one I know,' her brother observed, in a tone of remonstrance, to which again she made no reply. But after a moment she rose, and said:

'Well, I am busy, if you men are not. Come, Giles, if Peregrine wants to have an interview with Dr. Noble we had better leave him to it.'

Giles rose instantly.

'Good-bye, Peregrine, if I should not see you again,' he said, shaking hands with his friend. 'Till Tuesday, then,' he added to Godfrey, and shook hands with him, too.

Alizon made no effort to do this. Scarcely moving her head, she wished him good-morning, as she went out. It did not disturb him in the least. Her shaking hands, or not shaking hands, with him, could not make the slightest difference to the fact that there she was; he had found her, and it was she, herself, whom his spirit claimed for his own, and whom he loved; not the things she did or left undone.

CHAPTER XV.

PHYSICIAN AND PATIENT.

THEIR retreating footsteps were soon lost, and as soon as they were out of hearing young Blundell turned to Godfrey, saying:

'There! they have gone! Now, I want some talk with you, doctor. Have you your stethoscope with you?'

'Yes, I have it.'

'Then would you have the goodness to fasten that door?

There's a bolt. I don't want Alizon to know, just this minute, what we are up to.'

'Does he imagine that she will not know, just as soon as she pleases?' thought Godfrey, within himself.

'And then give my heart a thorough examination. I never let Burton meddle with me, ass that he is, except just to give me a pick-me-up, like you did last night. But it is a good while since I was in London and saw M——. He gave me a very encouraging account when I did see him. But it seems to me that, whether I'm on the mend or not, I've often felt very queer lately; so easily upset; able to do so little. They say it's always darkest before dawn, so perhaps that is a sign that I am getting well.'

Godfrey made no answer to this as he helped Peregrine to divest himself of some of his clothing. He knew very well that, though there might be amendment, there was no such thing for him as 'getting well.'

Young Blundell was, or had been, much more distinctly and strikingly handsome as a man, than was his sister as a woman. He was tall, and his figure, though wasted with disease, was perfectly formed and proportioned. His muscles, from weakness and disease, had shrunk and become soft and weak, but the finely formed features of his face were there; rather hollow and very pale, but none the less handsome for that. There was the shock of wavy, dark hair, the almond-shaped eyes, also dark and rather languid in their expression, the handsome mouth betraying both strength and weakness of a kind sensuous rather than sensual, mobile, and capable of the sweetest and also of the most disagreeable smiles. But when in repose there was a fretful, discontented curve of lip and nostril, telling that he chafed under his affliction of ill-health and enforced seclusion.

Godfrey made a careful examination of his patient. He did not know what the London doctor might have said, but he knew very well what he must have found. Peregrine Blundell was a doomed man. He might struggle for a longer or a shorter time with his enemy, but he was in that enemy's grasp—the grasp that never relaxes, though it may seem to do so, and that always, in the end, kills.

'Well?' he asked, when Godfrey at last lifted his head, after the last sounding and listening, and put his stethoscope into his pocket again.

'Well,' replied Godfrey slowly, and he wished he had not to answer; he delayed it for a minute by helping Peregrine to put

on his things again, but that was soon done. The young man was looking at him earnestly, and with some anxiety. 'Well, you have *angina pectoris;* but you knew that, did you not?'

'What I want to know,' said Peregrine, giving him no chance of escape, 'is—will this cursed thing kill me, or will it not?'

'It is a disease, or rather one of the features of a disease, which always, sooner or later, kills. It kills as surely as disease of the lungs, or any other mortal organic disease. But it may not kill you for many years yet.'

Peregrine's face scarcely changed, save that perhaps it went a shade paler, and his lips set themselves more tightly together. There was a little pause. Then he said:

'And in the meantime, I suppose, I shall go on getting worse, not better?'

'The disease will progress, of course, but you may, if you take care, have long intervals almost or entirely free from suffering; and your suffering can always be mitigated very much.'

'Ha!' He was silent again, looking very serious, and frowning slightly. The seriousness grew to sadness as Godfrey watched, till at last he said, gently:

'Surely it is not altogether news to you?'

'It is news, and it isn't news. That big man in London, you know, put it in a different way. He said, "Your heart is a bit wrong. You have what we call *angina*. You'll have to be very careful, and to have a lot of patience. You'll have relapses, but you must not get discouraged however many relapses you may have. Never say die," or something like that. I forget his exact words. And he was in such a deuce of a hurry, and I'd seen his waiting-room getting fuller and fuller. I made no appointment with him, and, by Jove, I waited two hours before I saw him. Never waited so long for anything in my life—before or since. My sister was in the waiting-room with me, and she nearly had to hold me down to my chair. I couldn't go into any more particulars. Besides, I saw in his eye—don't you know how you can tell things from a fellow's eye sometimes?—that he didn't intend to tell me any more than he had done. So I came away. I've never had any very bad attacks since, till that last one. One or two small ones. We always sent for Burton just at the moment, you know. But I never asked him a question on matters in general. One felt sure he didn't know, and would pretend he did. My sister wants me to see a fellow at Kirkfence. He's very clever at these things, I believe. Ramsden, his name is—Sir Henry Ramsden. Do you know anything about him?'

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'Oh, of course. Sir Henry Ramsden is one of the first men in the profession. I know about him.'

'Well, I'm not going to see that London fellow any more. It is more trouble than it is worth. If I can't go to London for pleasure,' said Peregrine, resentfully, 'I don't want to go at all. And I don't see why I should begin fooling with this Ramsden man, either. It seems to me you know all about it. I think I shall constitute you my physician in ordinary. I am sure you would do quite as well as any of them. Will you undertake me?'

Godfrey flushed all over his face. He was surprised, and, being human, was much gratified too. It was something to be so highly appreciated even by one evidently so blindly ignorant on all professional matters as this poor Peregrine Blundell. But he said at once:

'I do not think it would be right for a stranger like myself, and one who has not been many years at his business either, to undertake a grave case like yours without the full sanction of your relations.'

'I have no relation, except my sister—at least, none who has any authority in my affairs,' said the young man, flushing angrily. 'And if I wish it, and am satisfied, what does it matter what any one else thinks?'

'It would matter very much to me; so much that, as I say, I would not undertake it. Miss Blundell must, of course, be anxious for you to have the best advice. That is evident, if she wishes you to see Sir Henry Ramsden. If she agrees to it, and if you will also consent to send for Sir Henry in consultation with me, I will do what you wish. But I could not agree otherwise. And you know I am only here for six months.'

'Oh, hang six months. Set up for yourself here, and cut Burton out. I'll undertake to have some sort of illness to start you, and Barras would do the same, I've no doubt. What are you laughing at?' Then, without waiting for a reply, but laughing a little himself, 'And what must you have this Ramsden over for!'

'Because he is a man of the greatest knowledge and acumen. I'm only a beginner, a mere child, where he comes. If I could see him, and explain to him what I think about you, and how I should treat you, and he were to agree and approve, I should consider myself justified in doing what you wish.'

'Well, of all the scrupulous saw-bones I ever heard of!' cried his patient, with unvarnished candour. Then, looking at Godfrey: 'Look here, doctor, I'll do what you say. I like

your honesty, by Jove, but I do. You are in the right of it. I will tell my sister what you say, and we'll have this other fellow over, and between you you'll patch me up for some time yet.'

'To that I agree without reserve.'

'All right! I feel certain you will do me a lot of good. I shall get quite active again; but I suppose I should not be able to do anything violent, yet awhile?'

'I'm sorry to say you ought never to do anything violent again in the way of exercise, which I suppose is what you mean.'

'So that London fellow said. At least, *he* said, for a long time. . . . . Never another ride to hounds, I suppose?' he added, after a pause, looking wistfully at Godfrey, who shook his head.

'That would not be at all a wise proceeding for one in your condition,' he said.

'Might as well come on top of my head over a five-barred gate at once, I suppose you mean? Well, I'm young yet. I was thirty-one a month ago.'

He paused.

'But one can set one's teeth, and give it all up, I suppose.'

'When one must,' said Godfrey, as cheerfully as he could, 'I suppose it is best also to say, "I can."'

'Now, come! Did you ever give anything up—anything serious?' asked Peregrine, crossly.

'I have never had what you have to give up,' said Godfrey, quickly, 'but I have known all my life what it is to wish for things very much, and know that there was not the slightest chance of my ever getting them. Can you tell me the difference?'

Peregrine shook his shoulders discontentedly.

'Two wrongs don't make a right,' was his way of getting out of giving an answer. Godfrey laughed.

'I will go away now, and leave you to be quiet a little. Shall I ring for any one to come to you?'

'No, thank you. I shall think about what we have been saying. I'll tell you one thing you will always have, whether you wish for it or not,' he added, looking sharply at Godfrey.

'Pray what is that?'

'Implicit confidence from every one who has anything to do with you. That's a pretty heavy responsibility. Hasn't it always been so?'

'By no means,' said Godfrey, thinking of his mother, and of her distrust of his wisdom and rightness.

'Oh, I don't believe it. I'm always right. Well, you will give me a call now and then, won't you?—non-professional. Good-day.'

He held out his thin, delicate hand, and as Godfrey left the room he had the impression of seeing, in a sort of side view, the invalid turn over on his couch with his face to the wall, and of hearing a deep sigh.

He saw nothing of either Giles or Alizon as he made his way downstairs and into the hall. The door stood open. He went out, and back to Moorside.

Though Godfrey did not again see the Great Undermoor people before meeting them on the Tuesday at Mr. Barras's, he heard of them and from them, and transacted business in their behalf.

He got a note one day:

'SIR,—My brother is anxious to have the consultation between yourself and Sir Henry Ramsden as soon as possible. Will you try to arrange with Sir Henry for some time on Wednesday next?—Yours truly,

'ALIZON BLUNDELL.'

In accordance with this very definite request Godfrey wrote to Sir Henry, and only received his reply, making the desired appointment, by the evening post on the Tuesday, an hour before he set out to Mr. Barras's house.

April had now given place to May. They were still in the very early days of the month, and the east wind was yet to the fore. When he arrived in front of the house he found all the company assembled—that is to say, his host and the two Blundells. They were standing about, bareheaded and in their evening dress; and Miss Blundell's evening dress became her very well, as Godfrey quickly saw. It was black, and it was made of lace; so much was all that his masculine eye gathered. Also he found that some red flowers in her corsage set off her appearance greatly, and that she looked more like a handsome woman now than he had seen her look before.

On this occasion she again wished him good-evening, and again did not shake hands with him. But when the first greetings were over she looked directly at him, and inquired:

'Have you heard from that man yet?'

'Sir Henry, do you mean? Yes.'

'Then, Giles, if you'll excuse me, I should like five minutes' talk with Dr. Noble, if there is time before dinner. You would

rather I settled it than you, Peregrine, would you not?' she added.

'Oh, Lord, yes!' said he.

Giles at once desired that she should use his drawing-room as if it were her own. She turned to Godfrey and said:

'Then will you come?' and led the way into the house.

She seated herself near the fireplace, and looked at him, all the carelessness gone from her face, which looked business-like, and even a little lined and worn. She had curious, sloping eyes; the eyes which may and often do give piquancy to a plain face, but which need not by any means betoken gentleness or amiability of character.

'You heard from Sir Henry—why didn't you write to me?'

'Because I only got his letter an hour before I set out for this house. He appoints to-morrow afternoon at twelve-thirty.'

'Oh! To-morrow at twelve-thirty. That means lunch. What a bore! So horrid to have to press bread and salt upon a man who has just been telling your only brother that he has a mortal disease.'

She eyed him keenly. He made no reply.

'My brother has told me of this wish of his that you should become his medical adviser,' she went on.

'And also what I wished about Sir Henry Ramsden, I hope?'

'Oh, dear, yes; he told me that. That was quite right, of course. As a rule, I let him have what he wants; and he must have this, too, I suppose.'

'Meaning that you don't think that he will practically gain much by having it?' said Godfrey, smiling.

'Oh, I don't say that,' she replied, in the same curt manner. 'I think he may gain a great deal by it. He has few friends. He needs a good friend, who also knows something more than he does—like you, if I may say so. But a friend is not bought by calling him a doctor and paying him his fees.'

Certainly she was not like any one he had ever met before. That troubled him not a jot. But his answer was not easy for him to say, though it was clear enough and easy enough to his own mind. He could not say to her—

'From the first moment in which I saw you I knew you were different to me from every one else in the world, and more to me; and I cannot conceive of myself as being anything but your brother's friend.'

No, somehow or other he must intimate that while he would take the fees, like any other decorous young surgeon with his

way to make, yet he would be the friend too. At last he said, slowly:

'I am very sorry for Mr. Blundell. I am young, too. I know what he must suffer in being afflicted with such an illness. I should like to do what I can to help him. And——'

He hesitated.

'And what?' she asked, gravely.

'I should not speak of personal feelings, at least it is not etiquette to do so, but you yourself have said that your brother has not many friends. I have very few. I had no reason to expect so kind a reception as I have had from Mr. Barras and your brother. They have trusted me completely, though I am so great a stranger to them. It helped me through the detestable experience I had when I came here. I should like to help him, as I said.'

There was a pause. He had said his say, however haltingly and inadequately, and now he looked at her quite boldly. She, for her part, returned his gaze. Again he felt, and more potently than before, the tremendous, strong life and force of this woman's nature, as she sat there so quietly in her silks and laces. She neither smiled nor spoke for a few minutes, but searched his face with her curious eyes, and then said abruptly, almost rudely:

'If that is what you mean, give me your hand upon it.'

He was on his feet in a second. Not a word did he utter till he felt her fingers close over his. This, then, was the reason of their first handshaking; no meaningless form, but something that both of them meant to the bottom of their souls. As she looked up at him with the same regal glance (he could think of no other word for it) so he looked down at her with absolute truthfulness and sincerity.

'That is what I mean, if you will let me do it,' he said.

'I shall let you do it. It is a great power, that of being able to help, and I believe that you have it. I shall be grateful if you help me in this.'

'I shall be grateful if you will let me help you.'

'Then it is agreed. But I must ask you to understand that I am not one of the people who often speak their thanks, and I am very exacting in the matter of friendship.'

'Perhaps I understand that already.'

'Very well. Shall we now go and see whether the others are still out of doors?'

He followed her silently from the room. As they went into the hall they encountered Peregrine and Mr. Barras.

CHAPTER XVI.

LE MOT DE L'ENIGME.

'Oh, you have come in. I suppose it was getting a little cold?' said Alizon. 'Dr. Noble, has Mr. Barras shown you his staircase yet?'

'No, he has not.'

'Well, come, there is still enough light to see it by. It is quite the feature of this house. I always tell him the house was built for the staircase, not the staircase for the house.'

'There is a fine old staircase in your house,' he said, as he followed her.

'Oh, ours is well enough, in its way, but this is something remarkable.'

And, indeed, it was a wonderful staircase, looking as if some former occupant had concentrated the whole power of his mind on its design and production. As a matter of fact it was too large and ornate for the rest of the house and its decorations, and was furthermore stowed away in a corner so that it could not be very well seen.

'It does not blow its own trumpet, at any rate,' observed Godfrey, as they paused opposite to it, and Peregrine and Giles came up behind them.

'It is a white elephant, for all that. He has a special maid to polish it, with extra wages and a double allowance of beefsteak.'

'I will trust you to make game of any old treasure that may happen to be especially near to a man's heart,' said Giles, in a tone of annoyance. 'But I have confidence enough in Dr. Noble's judgment to feel sure that he will see it rather from my point of view than from yours.'

'What do you say to that?' she asked, turning to Godfrey.

'That if I possessed such a staircase and a special maid was necessary to keep it in order, I would have the maid, and not grudge the beefsteak,' said Godfrey, decidedly; to which Giles and Peregrine responded 'Hear, hear,' and Alizon, with a short laugh, remarked:

'You have such fond notions. Men generally have when they have no one to look after them.'

Godfrey could not help seeing the look that flashed into Giles's dark eyes as, with undisturbed equanimity, she uttered this speech. His reply, however, was a low bow, and the words in a sarcastic tone:

'I thank you for one more proof of your kindness and consideration for me and my interests.'

Here one of the maids came to announce dinner, and he offered her his arm, still with the same expression of half-annoyance, half-delight upon his face. They went first into the dining-room, and the two young men brought up the rear.

It was a pleasant repast—pleasant as few that poor Godfrey could remember to have fallen to his lot in his far from flattered or distinguished career. He had thought that these two country gentlemen might converse on topics with which he was little acquainted; on hunting or shooting; crops, or quarter sessions, or riparian rights; and, far from turning up his scientific nose in advance at the probably artless babble of the rustic, he had hoped that they would not find him very dull and stupid as regarded all their topics. For, with all his sturdy steadfastness of disposition, he was keenly sensible of the pleasure, advantage, and recreation to be got by having friends like these to fall back upon during what he was sure would otherwise be a dreary sojourn at Moorside.

But the talk began about books almost at once. They turned out to belong one and all to the category of 'general reader,' though Alizon professed her special partiality for the lives of remarkable women, especially devout Catholics. Peregrine avowed his delight in what he called 'free-thinking stuff and weekly newspapers,' and Giles averred a predilection for the novels of Ouida, alternated by a diligent perusal of different volumes of the International Scientific Series. Godfrey, when questioned, revealed a tendency to indulge in historical memoirs on the one hand, and in the poetry of Walt Whitman, on the other, while he admitted at the same time that the romances of Dr. George Macdonald and those of George Sand had afforded him almost unqualified delight. And he could scarcely maintain a decent gravity as a vision flashed through his mind of what Hilda's face would have betrayed could she have heard these confessions.

'You are laughing!' said Alizon to him.

'No, I was not,' he assured her. 'Not quite. I was only wishing my sister was here.'

'Have you a sister?' she asked, with sudden interest.

'I have two,' said Godfrey, with contentment in his tones.

'Have you? Don't think me very impertinent, but are they older or younger than you?'

'Younger. Hilda is just twenty-six. Letty is only seventeen.'

'And do they live at home?' she asked, still with great interest.

'They live at home—yes. But my sister Hilda has her work to do.'

'And what is her work—if you don't mind?'

Peregrine and Giles were both smiling.

'Really, Alizon, you are enough to abash a fellow,' said her brother. 'How do you know Dr. Noble likes to be asked such questions?'

'I am certain Dr. Noble is quite capable of shutting me up if he doesn't wish to answer them.'

'I have not the slightest objection to answer them,' said Godfrey, distinctly. 'I am proud of both my sisters. Hilda is the head-mistress at the High School where we live. She has to rule over two hundred and fifty girls and all their teachers, and she does it well.'

'I must know her—I *must*,' said Alizon, earnestly. 'I had no idea you could tell me anything so interesting. Do not mind the laughter of these two trifling creatures,' she added, with a slighting side-glance at the other two. 'But tell me; your sister—is she very—very——'

'Strong-minded is what you mean, Alizon,' said her brother, maliciously; 'and even you don't quite like to say it. She means is she woman's-righty, or at all terrible, Dr. Noble?'

Godfrey burst out laughing.

'I wish you could see her,' was all he would say.

From that moment there was distinctly visible a change in Alizon's manner to him—a cordiality and a suavity which she had certainly not displayed before; and she looked at him frequently. But she let that topic drop, and began to talk about the Church, as exemplified in the neighbourhood, and about its props and supports, as shown in a new curate who had been fluttering the dovecotes in the vicinity.

'I suppose you have called upon him, Giles?' she said. 'You are always such a model in that respect.'

'Yes, I called upon him.'

'And I upon his sister. I didn't know they were Irish before.'

'Oh, didn't you? Of course they are.'

'Miss Chirton told me at once that they were. She has a command of language—such a command of language! And she revealed sides of the Irish character whose existence I had not even suspected before.'

'Now, what did she tell you?' asked Giles.

'Well, she told me this—not in so many words exactly—that she and Mrs. Pratt, the new parson's wife at Birchfield, hope to effect a great change in the social life of this neighbourhood. She asked me if I had called on Mrs. Pratt. I said No. I didn't reveal that I was even then on my way to do so and get the business over at one rush. So she said, "Oh, I think you will like Mrs. Pratt. She, also, is an Irish lady. She is so very affable and adaptable."'

'You are making it up,' said Peregrine and Giles, with one voice.

'I am *not*. "So very affable and adaptable. You often—indeed, constantly—meet with that affability and adaptability in the Irish, or in those who are of Irish descent. And also in persons who have mixed a good deal in the world. They learn it, you know. Travelling and mixing in the world will do so much to soften the manners." Now, you know, I really felt that I had been repaid for my time and trouble when I heard that. I'm sure I shall like her. I told her I never went anywhere, and you should have seen the mingled condescension and pity which immediately suffused her face. She said she would give me as much of her time as she could.'

'Mind you don't ask her to dinner, that's all,' said Peregrine, in a warning tone.

'Well,' said Giles, 'they must be both unconscious humorists. He made the smallest joke I ever heard perpetrated, even by a parson, the day I saw him. He said the church he had just left was St. Margaret's, and this also was St. Margaret's, but as this one, with its congregation and parish included, was only about one-third the size of the one he had left, he intended to distinguish between them by calling that Margaret's, and this Maggie's.'

'Oh—h!' exclaimed Alizon, with rapture. 'Peregrine, wouldn't that suit Dr. Burton? Wouldn't he revel in it, and repeat it to all his friends and patients, till the friends had to quarrel with him, and all the patients had relapses? Oh, he would be set up in jokes for a year if he could once thoroughly grasp all the subtle humour of that!'

Further frivolities brought the dinner to a close, and they returned to the drawing-room. In there, Alizon, being a little aside with Godfrey, asked, in a low tone:

'Have you a likeness of that sister of yours?'

'Yes, I have.'

'Will you let me see it—as a great favour?'

He looked at her rather keenly. But she was evidently in the greatest earnest, so he replied:

'Yes. I will show it you the next time I see you.'

'That will be to-morrow, then, when this man comes over from Kirkfence. Now, Giles, you will sing your song for us, won't you?' she added, quickly, as he approached.

'Surely I may be let off to-night?'

'No, certainly not. I will play the accompaniment for you. I know it by heart.'

She went to the piano and played, and he sang in good style one of Schubert's finest songs.

'Bravo!' said Peregrine, when it was done.

'I love to hear you sing that song, Giles,' she told him. 'It makes me feel that you deserve all that consideration for which you are so grateful.'

He made no answer. She still remained seated at the piano, playing one short phrase after another, till, in the country stillness, wheels were heard on the gravel, and her carriage was announced.

'Let us drive you back to Askley Bridge, Dr. Noble,' she said, rising.

He thanked her, but declined, saying he should like the walk back. She did not press the offer, but, shaking hands with him, still with that look of increased cordiality, said:

'If you would stay and have lunch with us to-morrow it would be so kind of you—as Sir Henry will be here. He's coming at half-past twelve, Peregrine,' she added, resting her hand lightly on his shoulder. 'Don't you think it would be nice of Dr. Noble if he would have lunch with us?'

'I am sure I wish he would,' said Peregrine, quite eagerly.

It was easy to Godfrey to see that they both dreaded this lunch with the big doctor to-morrow, and he agreed immediately to do as they wished. Then they took their departure. When they had gone, Godfrey was about to take leave also.

'Oh, you can stop for a single weed,' said his host. 'It's very early yet; barely ten.'

He led the way into a comfortable little smoke-room, his own special den, where he turned up the lamps and produced pipes and cigars.

'You find him very ill, I suppose?' said Mr. Barras, after a short silence. 'He has been telling me of your conversation with him.'

'He is very ill, of course. Any one who has that disease can only be very ill. But it does not follow that he will die, for many years—though he might die to-morrow, or to-night, just as easily as not.'

'It's desperately hard lines on him—poor old Peregrine!' said Giles, in a rather hoarse voice.

'Yes, I suppose so.'

'You suppose so! Wouldn't you feel it hard lines in his position?'

'His position as what? Young man with death staring him in the face—or landed proprietor who can't carry his possessions with him whither he is going—or what?'

Giles mused.

'Perhaps I hardly know what I meant. I meant, in general. To have everything and be obliged to leave it all. He likes it. He would like to live—that's what makes it such hard lines.'

'No one can ever settle that question, I suppose, as to what constitutes the hardship in such cases. There are lots of people, I daresay, with the same illness, and with poverty and hardships of all kinds to combat as well. He will never know the worst horror of disease. If the road to death can be made easy, I suppose it will be made so for him. It seems to me as if there were one strong hand which will never loose its hold of his to the last.'

'Ah, you mean his sister,' said Giles, with a sudden, subtle change in his voice. 'Yes, you have gauged her rightly. She is strong—strong as life and death themselves. He has her. And yet, that both their lives should be so spoiled!'

Godfrey hesitated, but said at last:

'You will pardon me if I say I don't quite see that. Illness and disease and death are sad things, but they need not be degrading things, or ruinous things. They may make a character greater instead of smaller. Why should he and his sister have their lives spoiled just because of that? It may be the best thing for both of them.'

Giles shook his head.

'I see you don't know,' said he. 'I wonder how it happened that you have not already heard something up at that gossip-shop.'

Then Godfrey remembered Slater's mysterious hints and warnings, which he had refused to allow him to enlarge upon. He looked at Giles inquiringly.

'I suppose you mean there are complications of which I know nothing,' he said. 'That may very easily be, and I am not very curious in the matter. I withdraw what I said.'

'You do not know, evidently, but every one else does. It is no secret, though, of course, one never mentions such a thing to the persons most interested. That heart-complaint is not, to

my mind, the truly tragic part of his life. His tragedy is, that eight years ago he married a wife; a woman miles beneath him in everything; no position, no education, no brains, no sense, no nothing except a pretty doll's face and a fashion-plate figure. He was twenty-three, she was between seventeen and eighteen—the same age as his sister was then. He married her, and they lived together, or tried to live together, for about three years, and then the crash came. It was the most miserable, hopeless business that was ever heard of. Of course with him the illusion was over almost immediately, and as time went on she irritated him nearly to madness. He saw so plainly all that she was. She could not understand why she should all at once displease, after being perfection to him. Again and again they tried it on, but it was of no use. Each time he got more disgusted with her. This dragged on for a year or two, when this heart trouble first began to show itself. Something had to be done. The divorce court never even came in question. She was as unimpeachably virtuous as she was hopelessly unsuited to him, and she was perfectly willing to put up with anything so that she kept her position as his wife. They compromised at last, about two years ago; Miss Blundell stepped in, when she fairly understood how things were, and took them both in hand. The doctors said it was as much as his life was worth to be having scenes of any kind, or worries and annoyances. He had got to such a pitch of exasperation over the whole thing that I don't know what he might have done. There were the two children to be considered. He has everything at his absolute disposal, you know. He can leave Undermoor and every penny he has to a hospital, or build a church if he chooses. It was arranged at last that Mrs. Blundell and the children should live at Kirkfence, and he came to Undermoor to be quiet. She came with him, to look after him—his sister, I mean. That has been going on for two years, as I said.'

'What a wretched business!'

'You may well say so. To her, you know, this kind of life—stagnating here, and constantly engaged in settling disputes and keeping the peace between him and his wife—is simply maddening. I don't know how she goes on with it, I'm sure. Before she came and settled down at Undermoor, to this kind of thing, she was a great deal in society, and she liked it too; as you may see, she has life and brains for a dozen ordinary women. She seldom troubled Undermoor, unless there was plenty going on to make it worth her while to come. Now,

you may gather from his condition what her life is. She devotes herself to him and to his interests; or rather, to the interests of the whole family. Things would soon be as bad as ever again but for her. Mrs. Blundell gets exasperated sometimes, and it takes a good deal to put her straight when she does. You may conceive that it is not an easy position.'

'Yes, I can.'

'I meant to tell you this when I found you did not go away with them,' said Giles, 'I hate gossip. I have told you facts—bold, bare facts, not gossip. There is gossip about it, of course—any amount. Some people blame him; some her. I make no comment upon it. But I can see you will be asked there, and you may come a good deal in contact with them. I hate to think of you hearing a lot of idle tittle-tattle, with the false and true so mixed that you cannot separate them. They are amongst my oldest friends, and I believe I can trust you to receive this information in the spirit in which I give it to you. I have not said a word to you that I would not say to you in Al——, in Miss Blundell's presence. Forewarned is fore-armed. We need not say any more about it.'

'No, certainly not. I'm very sorry. That is the tragedy, as you truly say—not the heart-disease. But excuse my asking just one question. These children—does the mother bring them up, she being so inferior?'

'They have a splendid governess—a really wonderful *gentlewoman*. Miss Blundell saw to that, too. They are very young yet, of course. The boy about seven, and the girl only five.'

'Ah! Poor little things!'

They said no more about it, from a sort of feeling of honourable scruple. But, though they had some desultory talk about other things, Godfrey's thoughts were, quite naturally, constantly straying off to the news he had heard. How profoundly thankful he was that it had been made known to him by Giles Barras, and not by Mr. Slater! He sat for an hour or so with his host, and then walked home. It was nearly midnight when at last he got into his own room.

CHAPTER XVII.

PHYSICIANS, WIDOWS, AND OTHERS.

When, on the following day, Godfrey arrived at Great Undermoor, he found the carriage which had been to fetch Sir Henry from the station just wheeling away from the door, and he was at once ushered into the drawing-room, where he found Alizon in company with the great man. She had said to Godfrey, 'What a bore!' meaning the necessity of entertaining Sir Henry at lunch. But she certainly showed no boredness in manner or expression.

Godfrey was in love, so it was perhaps natural that each new phase of her character and behaviour should appear to him in the light of a wonderful discovery. He had seen her standing, alert and watchful, beside her brother's sick-bed; later, he had seen her in her morning gown, stitching away as if for dear life at her large apron; then, in her evening dress, exchanging shafts of sarcasm with Giles Barras, as if she had never done anything more serious than to manage a flirtation in which she was heart-whole and self-possessed, while the enemy, or victim, was severely pressed if not positively disabled; and also exchanging promises of loyal friendship with him—Godfrey Noble—in a large, candid and womanly style, as far removed from any tinge of flirtation as the east is removed from the west. Now, he found her seated in her drawing-room, graciously attired in a soft-looking, stay-at-home costume, flowing and delicate, conversing with Sir Henry Ramsden; smiling a polite, blank smile, and receiving the great man's explanation of the difficulty with which he had arranged this visit, owing to the numberless calls upon his time and professional services, with a superb indifference which brought out the innate snobbishness and self-importance of the dissertation in a way which seemed to penetrate to the mind of the man of medicine himself.

'Why should I have listened to him with abject attention?' she said afterwards, when Peregrine lectured her on her 'off-hand way,' as he called it. 'I knew perfectly well what he was going to say, or could say. These big doctors really get to think themselves the arbiters of happiness and misery, and, after all, they are as often wrong as right.'

She received Godfrey in a way to ensure him Sir Henry's respect at any rate, putting aside all that candid, offhand

manner she had before used to him. Her manner, hitherto, would have shrewdly wounded a young man possessed of any tinge of vanity or self-importance. But, before this great dignitary of the medical profession, she treated Godfrey as if he had been on an equally high eminence with the other, and introduced him at once as 'my brother's medical adviser.'

Sir Henry, checked in the flow of his pompous oratory (his pompousness on personal matters did not prevent him from being as keen as tempered steel in diagnosing a difficult case) made a stiff, formal bow, but unbent so far as to observe that he was happy to make Mr. Noble's acquaintance. 'A newcomer in this neighbourhood,' he thought.

How long these elaborate nothings might have gone on it would have been impossible to say. Miss Blundell rose.

'I will leave you to make your communication to Sir Henry,' she said to Godfrey, 'and I will go and sit with my brother till you are ready to see him. If you will then ring the bell, you shall be taken to his room.'

So she bowed herself out, leaving the two men alone.

'Monst'ous fine lady, that!' observed Sir Henry, approvingly. 'What our neighbours across the Channel call a *maîtresse femme*. Fine sort! Makes your mere fine women and pooty girls look uncommonly foolish. I like such a woman as that.'

The business was over. The examination had been made; the diagnosis formed. The Nestor of therapeutics had given Ulysses the credit for sound knowledge and common sense, and had said he could not leave the patient in more intelligent or skilful hands. The lunch had been eaten (without Peregrine's presence); the carriage had come round once more. The great man had been whirled away, as he had been whirled thither; none the slower for the weight of the substantial fee which accompanied him. Godfrey had also made a move to go. He was with Peregrine in his own sitting-room upstairs, but the young man said:

'Wait a bit, unless you are obliged to go.'

Godfrey sat down again, until the carriage wheels were heard as it drove away, and in another minute, Alizon, who had been seeing Sir Henry off from the door, came into the room.

She shot a quick, searching glance at them both; then came slowly forward. Her face wore its usual grave unmoved look. Her brother, pale and tired from the nervousness and agitation of the interview, held out his hand to her.

'Well, Alizon,' he said, in a voice that strove hard to be

indifferent, 'it seems to me, he has just left us *in statu quo ante*.'

'*Quo ante* what, you goose?' she said, taking his hand, and sitting down beside him on the couch. Then, with her usual expression:

'If you and Mr. Noble are so fond as to think you can't get on without the advice of that great, puffed-out wind-bag——'

'Miss Blundell, I must protest against that,' said Godfrey, with much earnestness, while his face flushed. 'I assure you Sir Henry is not that. Whatever his manner may be, his knowledge and his acumen are both extraordinary.'

'A wind-bag of a man,' she repeated, tranquilly, looking Godfrey full in the face.

He was about to protest against her egregrious injustice, but he remembered that remark about the soothing influence of some of our friends, and he was silent, smiling. Then, turning to Peregrine, he said:

'You asked me to stay, Mr. Blundell, but I think it will be better for you if I leave you now. I'll call and see how you are to-morrow. Take a rest now.'

'Yes, that will be much the best,' said Alizon.

'Well,' said Peregrine, unwillingly. 'Don't ask me to see another of those fellows again, soon. I never was in a funk in my life before, but I was then. Doctor, can you play chess?'

'Not much more than knowing the moves.'

'But you would soon learn. We will have many a game—if you will come, that is—and a turn or two at billiards now and then.'

'I shall be very glad,' said Godfrey; and he left them either to keep silence or to discuss Sir Henry's verdict, which had been simply a confirmation of his own general knowledge, accompanied by some details from his great experience, which had been valuable to Godfrey, and had thrown a new light for him upon one or two points.

It was after four o'clock when he got back into the distasteful atmosphere of Moorside. Though, during his short sojourn there, he had been absent a good deal, still he had already got to understand that the doctor at the institution was not expected to take any part in the business arrangements thereof. His business was, if he could be made rightly to understand the same, to see the patients who came to him or had been sent to him by their own physicians, to persuade them that they were seriously indisposed, and that each of their cases

presented complications not ordinarily found or easy to deal with, and that, although a course of baths and 'medical rubbing'—or, as Miss Blundell profanely put it, 'washings and scrubbings'—would be of the greatest benefit, yet that the course would have to be persevered in for a considerable time before the promised good would accrue. By this method of procedure those who could be persuaded to stay put money into the coffers of the establishment, and, if they were not really very ill, did not perhaps take much harm themselves.

The whole thing was of course utterly revolting to Godfrey; was, indeed, a task which he had no intention of performing, except where he could honestly recommend the style of treatment pursued at Moorside. He was, however, conscious that he had absented himself enough lately. He could be present if he could not do much more to further the interests of the place. The doctor's appearance at *table-d'hôte* was considered desirable, as a kind of centre or nucleus from which might radiate, or towards which might gravitate, the wit and wisdom of the assembled company. He had dined out last night and lunched out to-day. He would do his duty now by not leaving the premises again until to-morrow. As he passed through the hall he looked in at the office, and found Slater there. He looked up.

'Oh, there you are, Dr. Noble. There's a gentleman waiting to see you—Mr. Barton.'

'Mr. Barton; humph! He has lost no time, anyhow,' said Godfrey, turning to go. 'I will see him at once.'

'Oh, and Dr. Noble,' continued Slater, the well-known grin overspreading his countenance. 'Mrs. Ackers has come, too.'

'Mrs. Ackers—who in the world is she?' Godfrey asked in wonderment, turning round and looking at Slater.

'The lady I told you of—Dr. Burton's flame.'

'Oh, what have I to do with her?' he exclaimed, impatiently, going away to interview Mr. Barton.

At dinner he took his accustomed place beside Mrs. Van Bibber, who was looking radiant. A young man, a good many years her junior, sat beside her. There was a certain family likeness between them, but he was as healthy and wholesome a specimen of manhood as she was a faded and meagre one (physically) of a woman.

'Dr. Noble,' said she, as Godfrey sat down and wished her good-evening, 'my brother has returned quite unexpectedly. I'm so glad. It seems quite a good while since he went away. Harold, I want to present you to Dr. Noble. He's done a great

deal to mitigate my sufferings in a social point of view since he came, and he's quite a friend of mine, aren't you, doctor?'

'I am proud to be numbered in that list,' said Godfrey, and said it sincerely.

Despite Mrs. Van Bibber's fads and extravagances in the matter of costume, and occasionally of deportment, he had liked her and believed in her all along.

And he liked her brother, Harold Ashby. This young man was a great contrast to his sister in every outward respect. Whereas Mrs. Van Bibber was thin, sallow and sickly-looking, young Ashby was broad and strong as well as tall; he had a strong, large, handsome face, with a tranquil smile, which Godfrey soon found was a true index to his nature. There was little of the nervous, restless irritability attributed to his nation about him—'rather lazy but dreadfully determined when he has once made up his mind,' his sister said of him. Whereas Mrs. Van Bibber talked without ceasing, Harold Ashby, though he had the same low and agreeable voice, was more silent than talkative. He could talk, though, on occasion. He was—so his sister had told Godfrey ere this—'the greatest kind of favourite in society; there never was such a society-man as Harold.' If so, he had not much opportunity of displaying his gifts at Moorside.

During a pause in the conversation, Godfrey glanced down the table, and at some distance from his end of it, near where Dr. Burton would have sat had he been present, he saw a newcomer—a lady. She was apparently a little past middle age, verging on elderly. She had a long face, a long nose, and a languishing, sentimental expression. That was all Godfrey noticed at this moment. But Mrs. Van Bibber told him, in a discreetly low tone:

'That lady, Dr. Noble, is Mrs. Ackers. I hear she is sadly disappointed to find that Dr. Burton has taken his departure.'

'Is she?' Godfrey smiled, broadly. 'Well, perhaps she will soon find the place unbearable without him, and will go.'

But Mrs. Ackers did not go immediately. She remained a whole week at Moorside, during which time she received and despatched many letters and some telegrams; during which time also she inaugurated a daily prayer-meeting and Bible reading in the drawing-room, and sent some withering shafts of sarcasm at Godfrey, because he declined to conduct it, on the plea that his profession did not include the spiritual as well as physical guidance of his patients. He got to hate her with a deadly hatred before that week was out, and was quite unable to

emulate the philosophic attitude of Mrs. Van Bibber, who, *more sua*, made an exhaustive study of her, and confided the conclusions at which she had arrived on the subject to Godfrey and her brother, as they sat together one afternoon on the pleasant terrace looking west. A smoothly shaven lawn stretched before them, from the middle of which rose a noble old oak-tree, through the tender green of whose young delicate foliage sun the setting shot variegated and gorgeous rays. To the right another terrace-walk, with hedges of rose bushes, beneath whose shelter bloomed just now rows of brilliant tulips and hyacinths—this was the nearer prospect, while below and beyond lay the river, the valley, and the still, noble moors rising on the opposite side. To the left were the dense shrubberies, dividing that part of the grounds from the moorland road which Godfrey now knew so well.

One or two active spirits were still running about at tennis. Pacing the right-hand terrace was Mrs. Ackers, quite alone, with a something in her hand whose nature the beholders could not quite distinguish.

'I've been talking to, or rather I have been talked to, by that lady,' said Mrs. Van Bibber, 'and I'm tired, in consequence—very tired. I think we all know what we really feel about Dr. Burton,' she added, turning to them with an engagingly open-hearted expression. 'We haven't much opinion of his intellect, or of his sincerity, and we do think he deserves punishing for some things he has done—or left undone. But at the same time, finite transgressions are not deserving of infinite punishment, and I doubt whether that which is actually laid up in store for him is not greater than he will be able to bear.'

'Why, what calamity overhangs him?'

'Mrs. Ackers is going to marry him,' said Mrs. Van Bibber, artlessly.

'Did she tell you so?' was their feeble, man-like question.

The lady looked at them with a kind of resigned contempt.

'Tell me!' she ejaculated. 'If you mean, did she take me by the hand and say to me in so many words, "Mrs. Van Bibber, I have formed the intention of making Dr. Burton my husband, and that intention I shall carry out," she did not. But I know that is her intention nevertheless.'

'Well,' said Harold, 'it's much better luck than he deserves. She's well-off, I suppose.'

'And a skinflint,' his sister interpolated.

'Whew—w! But perhaps he will make her more generous.'

'Perhaps he *may!* That woman would extract blood from a stone. He has nothing, I imagine. With his six feet of muscle and bone and sinew he has nothing, and is nothing. She is thin and slight; she is one mass of the weakest kind of affectations; her goody-goodiness, and her drivelling sentimentality, and her ignorance of everything worth knowing, are something appalling. To hear her talk, you would suppose that an unkind word would kill her, and a breath blow her away into nothingness—but I observe she reserves the right to be candid to other people, and point out their faults. But from her own tale she is a film of gossamer, with a nervous headache by way of spinal cord. And what she has made up her mind to do she will do, cost what it may. She will marry him, and he will never know what it is even to seem an individual again. He has his likes and dislikes—he likes plenty to eat, and she will not like to give it him. I pity him. I sounded her as to whether they would stay here, and she said, no, a woman could not be too quiet and retired in her life. She has a nice house in one of the midland counties, near Burming*ham*. She will settle him there, I fancy, and allow him some pocket-money—not much, but still some—and he will find that telling lies is no good with her, especially where money is concerned. She says she always makes use of any stamped envelopes she may get from tradespeople; she crosses out the printed address and writes out the one she wants. Same with postcards. And she saves all the half-sheets of paper, and sends at Christmas the cards she received last year, except when people stupidly write on the back "from your loving Minnie," or "Amy," or "Fanny." That's the sort of thing that betrays the kind of woman she is, you know. She interested me immensely . . . . And when she has taken him unto herself, then there will be an opening for some one at Askley Bridge—for any one who is willing to pay for it. She was calculating the exact sum which the goodwill of the practice ought to bring in. She values it at a pretty high figure, but I guess she will take what she can get for it. She says that Dr. Burton is very careless about money matters, and needs some one to look after his interests. She will undertake to do that for him. Dr. Noble, how delightful it would be if you were to take his place, eh?'

Godfrey shook his head, smiling.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MORAL THERAPEUTICS.

SOME days afterwards, Godfrey, wishing to supply himself with certain newspapers, walked down to the railway-station, at the bookstall of which place alone could such things be procured or ordered. Having given his address and order, he turned to leave the place, and in doing so confronted Alizon Blundell, looking very grave, not to say stern. She looked at him in her curious, unsmiling manner, and as he raised his hat she extended her hand and wished him a rather curt good-morning, which he returned with a smile of pleasure.

'Are you also going to Kirkfence?' she asked.

'No. I only came to see about some newspapers I want. I suppose you *are* going to Kirkfence?'

'Yes, I am; by the train which leaves here in ten minutes. And I meant to buy a newspaper, but I won't. I should not read it. The copybooks say, "A penny saved is a penny gained." I will earn my penny.'

'Or give it away,' said Godfrey, laughing. 'Buy your paper, glance through it, and as you leave the station at Kirkfence toss it to the engine-driver or the stoker. They will be glad of it.'

'Is that what you do?'

'Lots of fellows do. Or to a porter. And they always look pleased.'

Alizon laughed.

'They would not expect it from me, and would fail to catch it. Then my penny would have gone to destruction, utterly. Silly of me to be at the station so early. The train is not even in yet.'

'May I wait with you till it comes?'

'Yes, you may,' she said, after a short pause. 'Yes. I shall be glad if you will.'

They turned aside from the bookstall, and paced about the platform in silence, till Godfrey said:

'Nearly three weeks ago, when I arrived here, you got out of the same train. I saw you, but you did not see me.'

'Did I not? In that you are quite mistaken. I saw you at once, and guessed who and what you were. I recognised you immediately that night when you came to see my brother.'

'Yet your butler told me——'

'Oh, Baker did not know, of course. Poor old fellow! He never knows anything outside his own pantry.'

'You saw me! Well—I might have known that by now. Not because I'm such a distinguished-looking character, but because you see everything, I think.'

'It is, or should be, easy to see things when they are visible singly, with lots of space between each one, as at Askley Bridge,' she said. 'Our horizon here is not crowded or busy.'

Then, after a pause:

'I had been to Kirkfence that day, too. Do you know Kirkfence?'

'Only by passing through it in the train.'

'Horrible place! The most hateful place in the world to me.'

Her tone did not encourage him to inquire why. But, remembering all that Giles Barras had told him, he had no difficulty in guessing why. He had thought often over that story, of course, but had avoided coming to any judgment in the matter, even in his own mind. He could not, however, think of it as a stranger might have done. Whatever their outward relations, he felt that he was not, and never would be, a stranger in spirit to these two. They might perhaps never know it, or recognise it, but for him their troubles were his own. He could not help it. He made no reply except a vague 'Indeed!' to Alizon's denunciation of Kirkfence, and she presently said:

'I shall be away for a good many hours. Are you inclined to be charitable?'

'You would like me to go and see Mr. Blundell?'

'If you could manage it, and do not much object.'

'I think I can, some time to-day, though I don't think it will be before afternoon. Would that do?'

'Perfectly. But do you mean to tell me there is so much business going on up at that silly place on the hill?'

'There are sometimes things that have to be done even there.'

'It's a pity any one can be found to do them.'

'You live too near to poor Moorside. It looks twice its natural size to you.'

'Very likely. There is the train. Now it will have to stop and let out all the people who are in it. Then it will run out of the station and get its engine tackled on to the other end of it, and come back again, when I and all the other people who are going to Kirkfence, whether we wish to or not, will

get in, and it will go back again. Oh, Lord! what a fuss about nothing!'

She gave an angry sigh. Askley Bridge was a little terminus. The train stopped there. Beyond, began the rough fairy country of the Dales, and the nearest line 'cross country was eight or nine miles away. It all happened as she had said. He crossed over the line with her, put her into an empty compartment, and waited beside the door till the train should start.

'My brother has been better since that day you and Sir Henry saw him,' she said.

'I am very glad,' replied Godfrey, and looked up at her, his fair face, with its firm mouth and bright eyes, smiling slightly.

She was leaning a little forward and looking down to him—Askley Bridge only boasted one of the uncomfortable, old-fashioned platforms. Her face still wore that grave, almost displeased expression. It had been there all the time in spite of her having laughed once or twice. It was a strong, strange face that bent towards Godfrey: full of power—full perhaps of perversity, too—more attractive in the promise it gave of potential passion, decisive and irrevocable action in its owner than any beautiful face with nothing but beauty could possibly have been. Whether any man had ever before, even in his own mind, compared Alizon Blundell's face to a flower is extremely doubtful; but Godfrey made this comparison to himself now, as he met her sombre eyes—to some unusual, tropical flower; yes, tropical, despite her light colouring, more vivid and impressive than beautiful. There was no bright hue about her; her face was pale, her hair, though yellow, was not true gold, her eyes this morning had none of their frequent gleam of malice or mockery to brighten them, and her costume was as pallid and negative in hue as her own traits—grey and white all over; yet the impression of fire and strength and passion was there, and made itself felt.

'He says, thanks to you,' she added, with a very slight smile. 'It will be a real kindness if you go and see him to-day. Good-morning.'

He lifted his hat; the train moved out of the station. He walked away without looking after her. His day had opened well, he felt.

He was unable, as he had expected, to go to Undermoor till some little time after lunch. Just as he was setting out he was sent for to say good-bye to Miss Shaw, who, it appeared, was leaving the place. He had observed her at the table once

or twice in the course of the last two days. She was in the hall now, under the escort of a brother, who had come to fetch her away, and of her nurse, who was going home with her on a little visit. Slater, the head-waiter, the porter in charge of her luggage, and the housekeeper were all present, hovering about.

'Good-bye, Dr. Noble,' said the young lady, in clear and audible accents. 'I am glad to have met you. I half promised Dr. Burton to write to him and say how I feel after I get home, but I don't think I shall now. I suppose it would hardly do to entrust you with a message for him, because what I want to say is that I'm exactly the same as I was when I came; no better, and, for a wonder, no worse. You see, if I were to write and tell him I felt better, he would at once attribute it to the "cure," and the splendid way in which it had been administered; and if I were to say I was not better, he would say that was because I had not gone in for the "cure" thoroughly, or persevered with it long enough. So I think it might be better to say nothing about it. Don't you?'

'If those are your views, certainly I would send no message,' he said, smiling; 'though I think you are looking a little better than when I first saw you.'

'Because I have been up and dressed, and have had one or two drives in the open air—contrary to directions,' she rejoined, promptly. 'Give me your arm, Percy. Good-bye, Dr. Noble. As you don't really belong to Moorside, I may say to you that I never want to see either the inside or the outside of it again.'

She shook hands with him, and went away with her brother and the nurse, amid the demure silence and furtive glances of the domestics, and accompanied by a black look or two from Slater.

'A very rude young woman!' he said, testily, to Godfrey, when they were alone in the entrance.

Godfrey shrugged his shoulders.

'She speaks of things as she has found them, I suppose, Mr. Slater. You can't expect people to hold their tongues about such things, when they have paid such a price and got no good.'

Slater was silent, and Godfrey, with a feeling of admiration for little Miss Shaw's pluck, took his way to Undermoor.

He was taken at once to the upstairs sitting-room, where he had seen Peregrine on the morning after his first summons to him. He found him there now; lying on a sofa with a little

chess-board on his knee. As Godfrey entered, Peregrine was not playing. Two long white fingers were closed over a piece, as if he had been about to move it, but his face was lifted a little, and he looked out through one of the small, deep-set windows towards some young green on a tree which came close up to the casement. His expression was more than sad; it was dark, gloomy, and unhappy. A look of the profoundest dissatisfaction and bitterness sat on his closed lips, and overspread his whole countenance. In spirit he was far away from his unfinished chess problem—yea, and from the very house and room in which, bodily, he was present. He looked for a perceptible time at Godfrey, as the latter stood there, pausing, after he had been announced. At last he started forward, with a look of pleasure breaking through the gloom.

'What an unspeakable piece of charity on your part! Come along, and sit down. I'm glad to see you.'

He shut up his little chess-board and put it on one side. Godfrey asked how he felt. His face instantly clouded again.

'So, so! Incapable and weak, if I begin to move or try to do anything.'

'Too tired to work out your problem?'

A queer expression flitted across his face.

'*My* problem,' he said, in a sarcastic tone, 'mastered me long ago . . . . and the cursed thing about it was, it was my own fault.'

'Don't you think it is rather too soon to confess yourself "mastered" by anything yet!' asked Godfrey.

'No, I don't,' replied the other, crossly. 'When you know a thing, what's the use of pretending you don't? And as for it's being "rather soon," when it may be the end with me any minute! Come, doctor, as man to man, tell me how long I'm likely to last.'

He looked piercingly at Godfrey with a sort of dreary triumph, as if he thought: 'I have you there. How will you manage to shuffle out of that?'

'No, I can't tell you that. Your life is as uncertain as any man's can be. No insurance office would look at you, of course. And yet you may go on for many years, as I told you before. There's no reason why you should not.'

'But these attacks——'

'These attacks are not bound to kill you; you are not bound to have them very often, so long as you take care of your physical health and have not much mental trouble. That it is which is the killing or maddening part of life.'

'And what if I had a worry—not one that is here, in the house with me, but is in my life and drives me frantic whenever I think of it?'

'Worries that are not in the house with us seldom do drive us frantic, or kill us. That is all I can tell you.'

'You are right,' said Peregrine, after a pause. 'My worry does not come and stare at me, or threaten me, or point the finger of scorn at me. I say it drives me frantic to think of it, but it does not. If I had to live with it it would. If I had to see it and speak to it often, my worry would soon kill me—very soon.'

Godfrey was silent. Of course he knew what the other must allude to. He felt rather uncomfortable, as if he ought to speak out and let Peregrine know that he understood his mystic allusions. Before he could make up his mind, the latter went on:

'When I die, whether it be soon or late, there'll be precious little to be said about me, anyway. I shall have left no mark behind me, except'—he paused—'that I shall have made a few people miserable and none happy. I'm not a deep-thinking fellow, you know, nor a good one. I don't particularly wish I had been good either—good people are so stodgy—all I know. But I think I might have managed to leave behind me a better record than that. Don't you?'

'Possibly. How can I judge for you?'

The invalid gave an impatient kick of his foot, and sent a little footstool rolling away.

'What a confoundedly disagreeable answer to make. I can tell you it's not often I am in the repentant mood. And it does not last long when I am. I have a firm conviction that I've been more sinned against than sinning. But sometimes it comes over me in one or two ways. I feel that I've been either very bad or very stupid. I was just trying to decide which when you came in. I'm glad you came to-day, for I'm alone. My sister has gone to Kirkfence.'

'Yes. I saw her at the station this morning.'

'And she told you to come?' said Peregrine, suddenly and swiftly, with a jealous look, like that of a spoilt child.

'Not exactly. She asked me a question which told me you were alone, and I offered to come.'

'All the same,' said Peregrine, looking very sour; 'you did not come for me. No one ever comes for me now. I'm laid on the shelf. Even Giles——well, Giles never did come more than one-tenth for me and nine-tenths for some one else. But

there,' he added, crossly, 'don't let me keep you on any account. I expect there are half a dozen girls up at that "crazy place," as she calls it, who would be much more agreeable company than I am. You've done your duty—looked in upon the prisoner—go! I will tell her you did as she wished, and then she will be satisfied, whether I am or not.'

He gazed at Godfrey, with a withered desolate expression. Godfrey felt as if he all at once understood the full bitterness of the contrast between the present and the past in Peregrine's life. He said, quickly:

'I did not come just to satisfy her. I wished to come and was glad of the opportunity, and I shall stay a little longer, unless you prefer your own company.'

'Nay, my own company is hateful to me. And, as I said, no one comes to see me now. All the fellows I used to know have lives of their own. Lots of them are in town. I used to live in town. I only came here to stay a bit now and then, for hunting and the grouse and so on. Sometimes one or two will come for that. My sister has very few friends. As for girls, they never come here now. What would be the use?' he added, with a cynical smile. 'They know I'm not in the market any longer, and even if they would have a little pity on me their mothers wouldn't let them—and quite right, too. Spoil their chances somewhere else if they had been known as my friends.'

Godfrey again sat in a pained silence. Peregrine, he felt, must have been in uncommonly low or morose spirits to hold forth to him in this strain. It was true people had a way of taking him into their confidence very often. Still he was amazed, and indeed thrilled with a kind of shock, when Peregrine in a different voice said slowly:

'Did you know I have a wife?'

'Yes,' said Godfrey, looking at him, thankful he could get out of his false position. 'I was told so.'

'You could not be long up at that abode of charity and all the other Christian graces without hearing about a thing like that.'

'I did not hear it there,' said Godfrey, very gravely. 'It is true some one there wanted to gossip about you one day, but I cut it short. It was Mr. Barras who told me, after you had gone the other night.'

'Giles told you, did he? Well, quite right in Giles. Because he would not say anything odious about it.'

'He certainly did not.'

'My sister has gone to see my wife to-day,' went on Pere-

grine, his face growing darker and darker. 'She goes. She keeps it up. Women are so extraordinary. I always want her not to go; but she knows best, and she goes. I wonder what I ever did in my life to deserve this *curse*,' the young man continued, with suppressed passion. He had evidently been brooding over the matter till an outburst on the subject, however dangerous, was less so than any more of the smouldering silence. 'What was it in me that made me make such an ass of myself just then? I never used to be particularly stupid—at least I wasn't thought so. I had managed well enough up to then. And then I did it; then I wrecked myself. Why should one fellow be so much more lucky than another? There was a man I knew, my own age to a week, and he had always been behind me. He never got on as I did. We married about the same time. He lives in London. A year ago when I went up to see that fellow about my heart, he called, and his wife called upon my sister, and we dined there. He has got a woman for his wife who might be a prince's wife and he would have to be proud of her. She is young, too—about the age of my wife, I should think. She will never make him miserable, or disgust him, or disgrace him. She is all round his equal. I've thought of her fifty times since, and of him. He laid his money safely; I didn't. But I don't see *why* it is! How could I tell?'

How indeed! Godfrey had no answer. But he wondered what Peregrine's wife—this unsuitable wife—would have said? Would she also have cried, 'Woe is me! How could I tell?'

'Done for!' continued the young man. 'I never wanted to harm a fly, and two months after I was married I found I'd stabbed myself to the heart. What do you think? Ought one to go on for ever, in such a case, till one dies of vexation? Or ought a man to be able to shake himself free?'

'I can't tell,' said Godfrey. 'Isn't that one of the things that never can be really settled, and in which it seems as if the few must suffer for the good of the many? I don't say it is; I haven't had to think about it.'

'You may thank your stars, then, that you haven't,' said Peregrine, bitterly. 'If I were well—O Lord, if I were only well and strong, this should not trouble me much.'

Godfrey had a shrewd inkling (in spite of the attraction he felt towards the other) that his remark, at any rate, was profoundly true. Had he been well and strong, and able to do as he chose, or, in Slater's elegant phraseology, to 'fling a loose leg,' he would not have troubled himself much. Perhaps he had not depth enough of nature to be troubled because of the

abstract badness or wretchedness of a situation, but only if it interfered with his comfort and his wishes. But he looked as if he were utterly without counsel or comfort in the matter, so Godfrey said:

'Is it long since you—since Miss Blundell and you——'

'Oh, since Alizon and I took to housekeeping together?' said the other, with a grim little laugh. 'It is about two and a half years since we inaugurated this joint establishment. It seemed so odd, don't you know, for us both to be living at Undermoor; we had hardly been together here, to stay, since we were almost children. It is an experiment. She goes on with it; she would go on with it to the death. But I'm very tired of it.'

Indeed, he looked tired of 'it,' and of things in general.

'It was because I was so ill; something had to be done,' went on Peregrine. 'I had tried all sorts of things for the last few years; living in chambers, and travelling, and one thing and another. But always the same thing turned up in the end—my wife made a row, and I couldn't stand it. So then my sister came to the rescue and reduced things to some sort of order. She arranged it all, and I was so thankful at first to have peace that I agreed to everything. But, as I say, I'm tired of it.'

'It cannot be a very exhilarating situation,' Godfrey agreed with him.

Then Peregrine suddenly said:

'I'll tell you something else. Look here.'

He bent towards a writing-table, full of little drawers, which stood conveniently near his couch, opened one of them, and took a little case out of it. He handed it to Godfrey, who opened it and looked.

'Those are my children,' said Peregrine. 'What do you think of them?'

'They look very sweet little children, so far as one can tell from one of these black and white things,' said Godfrey, feeling a strange thrill, as he looked at the photographs of two (as he had said) 'very sweet little children,' with round faces, well cast heads, and, apparently, much silky, curly hair, like their father's. He was surprised—very much surprised—at the incident.

'They are what they look,' said Peregrine. 'No one thinks I care a button for them. I'm the abandoned wretch who has martyred his wife, and left her and his helpless babes to get on as well as they can. Even Al my sister takes that view of

it. I'd give anything, sometimes, to have that little chap to talk to and play with; but things were settled otherwise, and if I wanted him, don't you know, that would be a fresh wrong and a fresh outrage on my wife. And I would rather never see him again till I die, than speak with her or be near her for half an hour.'

Godfrey could find no answer to this. He looked at him in silence, with perhaps his feelings showing in his face. At last—

'I'm awfully sorry,' he said; 'because that looks hopeless.'

'It *is* hopeless,' said Peregrine, bitterly and drearily. 'It's utterly hopeless. She has committed no crime; she can't understand what's wrong; it is not in her. She often asks my sister what she has done, that she may not have her proper place and come to nurse me as a wife ought. Good heavens!' he gave an absolute groan, and plunged his hands into his hair. 'She doesn't know how it may be hell upon earth to certain people to have to be with certain others. Give that to me,' he added, rather jealously, as he stretched out his hand for the photograph-case, which Godfrey returned to him, saying:

'What you have told me only makes me wish I could help in any way. I fear I cannot. I see what a bad state things seem to you to be in. But there is one thing beyond all doubt. You have some one always with you and near you who can and will help you, always and effectually, better than any one else in the world can help you.'

Peregrine stared at him for a moment, as if he did not comprehend.

'Oh!' he said at last, 'you mean my sister, do you?'

'Of course.'

'Yes. She is strong—she is very strong. But . . . . the fact is,' he went on, with a naïveté or a cynicism, either of which would be remarkable, 'it's a vile, mean feeling that I have about her—sometimes. I never used to have it. It is only since I have been tied by the leg in this way that it comes over me. I used to be awfully proud of her in former days, when she led a different kind of life from this. There was no one fonder of gaiety and society than she was; but, I can tell you, it was she who had the whip hand of society, not society of her. She was always above it—the general run of it: and that was why she could do very much what she liked in it. It was not indispensable to her. There were other things she liked better really; so society respected her. But now, sometimes, I get so mad to think that she has the reins instead of me. I ask

myself, why wasn't she married, and in possession of a husband and brats on whom to exercise her powers? She would have made a splendid wife, because she can devote herself absolutely where she wishes to or thinks it right. And then, as soon as I come to reflect upon it, I see what a good thing it is that she didn't marry—good for me, I mean; that she was able to come and take the reins when I had to drop them; that she's such a splendid driver, too; and, above all, that she *is* so strong. For if we had both been weak it would have been pitiful, wouldn't it?'

'Your second thoughts are undoubtedly best in that matter,' Godfrey pronounced, unhesitatingly. 'And one thing is quite certain—Miss Blundell was born with the capacity for ruling, and ruling well.'

'Yes, I call her *soror dominatrix* sometimes,' said Peregrine. 'She doesn't always like it. But it's true. She must be boss; and that is rather a sad thing for a woman. Don't you think so?'

'Why?' asked Godfrey, somewhat surprised at this new view of the situation. 'Surely it is the really commanding mind that ought to rule, whether it belong to a man or woman.'

'All very well in theory, but I don't believe ruling women are happy, though. They want to rule more than they want to be happy, if you know what I mean.'

'They feel the need of power stronger than the desire for happiness, I suppose you mean?'

'Exactly. You have put it into the right words. I see you have a head on your shoulders. They sway about between the two, and don't enjoy either as they ought to. That's my idea at least. I've studied it—in my sister. There's more in her to study than in half a dozen ordinary women. I haven't found out yet whether she took me in hand for love of me or for love of power.'

'I should think you might be sure of the first, whatever you may think about the last.'

'I should think that you don't know her—or me,' was the huffy, ungracious response. To which Godfrey made no reply.

Peregrine, harking back to his ordinary grievances, went on:

'How hateful it is to be weak! To feel that the strength of mind, and of body, too, have gone to the wrong side.'

'The wrong side?'

'Yes, the wrong side. The distaff side should not inherit all the strength, and leave the other naked and bare.'

Godfrey saw that, whatever specific follies the poor fellow had committed, he had a sense of being wronged in general, and

a jealousy of the strength at which he could only look wonderingly and lean upon grudgingly and of necessity, but which he could emulate—never. It was, as he had said, pitiful.

'I don't say such things to every one, I can tell you,' went on Peregrine. 'I never said such things to any one before, and I can't imagine why I have said them to you. As for telling Giles anything against her——'

Godfrey stood up suddenly. It had gone far enough. He could hear no more. His soul was filled with a deep pity for the wrecked life before him, yet all the time he could not forget that he had heard only Peregrine's side of the matter. He must suspend judgment till he had heard the other. Perhaps he never would hear the other. In that case he must continue to suspend judgment.

'You are tired and not a bit well,' he said, 'or you would not say these things to me, either. You would not, if you were not feeling ill and miserable, say a disloyal thing of one who is, if I mistake not, loyalty itself to her friends. Isn't that the case?'

'Yes!' said Peregrine, almost sullenly.

'I wish I could help you,' added Godfrey, earnestly, and with utter sincerity; 'I have wished it ever since that night I was called to you. But I can't sit still and hear you say that. She must be the very mainspring of your life.'

'Yes, she is,' said Peregrine, darkly. 'Without her I should be dead in a fortnight, or perhaps a week.'

'Well then, isn't it——'

'Isn't it beastly low in me to have uttered one word such as I have spoken to you? Yes, it is. I hate myself for it. But, oh, man! if you knew what it was to be so weak and so dependent; to feel everything a burden, and to depend on another's strength for your daily life, such as it is, and to see that other so strong! I feel sometimes not only as if she had more than enough strength for both of us, but as if she had taken my share away from me—possessed herself of it unfairly. If there were only another!' he added, somewhat incoherently.

'Another?'

'I'll tell you what I mean. It isn't so much the being dependent that maddens me. It's the being dependent in just such a way. If one were dependent on a wife—a real wife—that would be all right. Or if there were a man in the case. If she were not alone. If she would marry Giles—but she would not. She would not have him. If he were her husband, and were there always, I would not mind half so much.'

'You would not have your sister marry some one she does not want, just to make things a little easier for you?' exclaimed Godfrey, incredulously.

'Pshaw! No, of course not—in theory. So selfish, so mean, so hateful! Practically, I feel as if she were a brute for not doing it—just, as you say, to make things a little easier for me.'

Godfrey was silent. Peregrine, after a pause, laughed his little quiet laugh, which Godfrey did not like, and said:

'You'll never want to speak to me again after that.'

'There you are wrong. All I can say is, I can follow you in a great deal of what makes you dissatisfied with your life, but not in that. There's no use in talking about it, because I can't put my mind in that attitude at all.'

'Very well. I've told you about the worst of myself. Now you know me as I am,' said Peregrine, with a look almost of satisfaction spreading itself over his features. 'You are going. Will you come again?'

'With pleasure, if I may.'

'Yes, do—any time. And look here,' he added, diving into another of his writing-table drawers. 'I think you are going to be a real friend of mine. I don't want you to have to come trailing round by the road every time you come to see me. You know the way by the tunnels, don't you—the way you came that night?'

'Oh, yes, I remember it well.'

'It's shorter by one-third than the other way—from Moorside, that is. Alizon has a key, so has Giles. She gave him one. And so have I, though I never use it now, nor want it. I'm going to give it to you!'

He held it out towards Godfrey, who hesitated to take it.

'Take it!' snapped Peregrine, irritably. 'Don't stand there wondering whether she will like it or not. It's all right.'

Godfrey smiled and took the key. He saw the state of things. He would not say anything to Peregrine, but if he should find that Peregrine's sister had the faintest objection to his using the key he would return it to her instantly.

'Thank you,' he said, slipping it into his pocket.

'Mind you make use of it. It opens the little door from the road,' said Peregrine, with quite a well-pleased smile, as he leaned back on his couch. 'Even when you are not coming into the house, you may find it pleasant to walk through the wood and beside the fishponds. I hate the fishponds myself; but some people are fond of them, and it is very quiet there.'

Thanking him again, Godfrey took his leave, went downstairs and out at the open hall-door, without encountering any one. He remembered well the road to the tunnels and fishponds, and, after a moment's pause, he took the way towards the tunnel nearest the house. Having traversed it, he found himself for the first time by daylight in the curious, dreamful place, half-wild, half-cultivated, in which the fishponds were situated. The trees were thick—their branches met and interlaced overhead. The afternoon sun sent long slanting rays through their tender spring greenery. Everything was so very still and quiet—a faint twittering here and there, a gentle rustling of the boughs and branches. The temptation was strong to linger about a spot which Alizon loved. He knew what Peregrine's 'some people' meant; so he ascended the sloping paths, and in a short time found himself by the edge of a large, oblong fishpond, surrounded by mossy walks, and here and there a bench to sit on. He walked on, dreamily enjoying the dreamful scene. At the head of this first fishpond the path again sloped upwards to the edge of a second and a higher one, not quite so large as the first, and oval in shape. This was surely the quietest, most forlorn spot in the world. A stone coping went part way round the edge of the pond, and sad, moss-grown stone figures stood at intervals gazing with their stony eyes into the still water. Two great white swans sailed proudly up and down the expanse of water. Here and there alders drooped almost into the pond. How sad, how sweet, and how stately it was!

In a kind of exalted reverie, he paced slowly beside the margin of the little lake, and listened with all his soul to the stillness, till, coming towards the path gently rounded to the oval form of the lake, he became aware, for the first time, of a recess within the verdant green of the bushes; a recess into which the afternoon sunshine was pouring, filling it with a pallid light. In the recess was a rustic seat of twisted wood, and as he looked towards it his eyes encountered, with a shock that thrilled him from head to foot, those of Alizon Blundell, who sat alone on the bench in her neat, trim, travelling dress, as he had seen her in the morning, every item of her costume as fresh and crisp as if she had just donned it; only her hands, ungloved and folded together upon her knee, looked—as the hands of suffering persons often do—as if strength and firmness had temporarily left them, and her face was pale, grey, and drawn with mental pain. It looked years older, and had strong, grievous lines on it. She was quite still, and quite

silent. She did not start when she saw him. Her fingers did not move, nor her eyes dilate. They simply met his, without change in the sombre gloom of their expression, and she remained silent.

'Miss Blundell!' exclaimed the young man, the colour rushing over his face, as he experienced a keen mortification and disgust with himself. 'What must you think of me? I can only beg your pardon and go. Another time, if you'll permit me, I will explain it.'

She looked at him for a perceptible time before replying, but at last said, with a strangled sigh:

'Do not distress yourself. I understand that my brother gave you the key of the door, and you thought the place was deserted and you might walk here. You were quite right. Do not think of it again.'

'That is the truth. But I will leave you to the privacy you expected.'

'I have been here for an hour; I am going in now. It has done me a little good, I think, sitting here. Then you have seen him?'

She did not, he observed, begin to bewail her lot, though the merest fool might have seen she was suffering.

'Yes, I have only just left him. He made me take this key. But I felt you might not like me to have it. So I beg to return it to you, to dispose of as you please.'

'Keep the key,' said Alizon, in a tone of such gentleness as he could hardly have imagined her using, 'and use it when you please, as he said. If it should ever happen that I had any reason for wishing it not to be used by you, I should let you know, and you, if I mistake not, would not be offended with me.'

'No, indeed!'

'Then that is all right. Now I am going in. I have been here long enough.'

She rose. Godfrey's way lay for some little distance with hers. At the point where, in the quaintly arranged place, they parted, he to go through one tunnel and she through another, she paused for a moment and wished him a grave 'good afternoon,' with a slight bend of the head. He returned it, and they parted.

'I wonder,' said he to himself, as he opened the door and walked on to the road, 'what is the thing that is wrong there—between those two? *Can* she be in fault in any way? I can't believe it. And as for him—what a mixture? I can't

tell whether he is more bad or good, more weak or strong. Anyhow, they are as different from each other as light from darkness.'

CHAPTER XIX.

NELLY.

When Alizon found herself alone in the railway carriage, after the train had started, and she had lost sight of Godfrey, the look of gravity which he had seen on her face on first meeting her settled into one of steady gloom. She was at no pains to look more cheerful than she felt. She had nearly an hour before her, in which to let her face wear any aspect she chose, and she chose to let the spirit which just then reigned within her open the door, as it were, and take its seat in her eyes, and on her mouth and brow. And the spirit was not a gentle nor a cheerful one. She was going forward to meet what she knew would be a hateful experience. It never had failed to be hateful before, and it surely would not fail now. She folded her arms across her chest, and looked drearily forth upon the country the train was passing through, the grey moors and green fields which lay between Askley Bridge and the great manufacturing town. Despite the dark look on her face, her first and uppermost thoughts were of Godfrey.

'A staunch heart!' she thought to herself. 'I would trust him through most things—as a friend. He's young, yet he seems so very unsophisticated. He believes in doing right because it is right, and in fighting abuses because they are abuses, and in not temporising with evil, and in giving a helping hand to those who need it. I wonder how long it will last? how much of it will have been knocked out of him by the time his term at Moorside is up? Because it will all be knocked out of him in time, of course. Meantime I think it is rather to my advantage to have met him while the bloom is still on the peach, so to speak.' She smiled grimly to herself. 'Probably he is like every other man at bottom. They are all brutes, when you have dug near enough to the foundations to find it out. Some of them do really try to conquer the brutishness, I am certain; and he is one of that lot. What a mercy that Peregrine has taken such a fancy to him.'

Then her thoughts went elsewhere, and she did not smile again, even grimly, till the time came for alighting in the roar

of the great station at Kirkfence. She glanced round her, almost without seeming to do so, and with her marvellous faculty for gathering in as it were, in a single sweeping look, all the things and persons in her vicinity, she quickly saw that there was no one she knew present. This ascertained, she walked to the outside of the station, and, getting into a hansom, told the man to drive her to '4 Addersley Park.'

He scrambled on to his perch, and set off at a good pace. They drove towards the north side of the town, gradually leaving shops and streets behind them, and then came to the usual row after row of suburban villas—single, semi-detached, or in long, depressing lines of monotonous sameness and regularity. The poet or novelist has yet to arise who shall rightly set forth the inward and outward, the objective and subjective, the atmosphere, physical and spiritual, of the suburb and of those that dwell therein. That, justly represented, would be realism with a vengeance. Alizon Blundell gazed with eyes all unseeing upon the weary, endless prospect. She had traversed this road times without number before, and always with more or less bitterness and vexation of spirit. It was not otherwise this morning.

By-and-by the houses grew more sparse and irregular, the intervals between them longer, the gardens a little larger, the detached houses more numerous, and the long hideous rows and terraces less so. Presently the hansom turned aside through some gates into a road, on the left hand of which was a kind of garden or pleasure ground, laid out with trees, grass, seats, and gravel walks. It was divided from the road by posts and chains; gates led into it here and there, and within were nursemaids, perambulators, and children mostly of tender age; also one or two persons who looked as if they might be the mothers of some of the said children. At the right hand, on the other side of the road, were garden gates—small apertures in a rather high wall. Behind them were long, pleasant gardens, in which the trees which had been there when they were laid out had been allowed to stand, and in each garden stood a single 'villa residence,' some quite small, others of much greater pretensions. This was Addersley Park; one of the quietest, and by far the most agreeable suburb of Kirkfence.

The cabman stayed his machine at the gate of No. 4. Alizon, who had been keenly observing with her long-sighted eyes the different groups of children disporting themselves in the grounds, got out, and, paying her driver, was turning away.

Won't I wait for you, lady?' he asked, persuasively, for it was a handsome fare to and from the town.

'No; I don't know how long I shall be here.'

With that, she opened the gate and entered the garden. Cabby climbed his box again, gathered up the reins, and in a huskily cheerful tone observed to himself:

'Mrs. Blundell at 'ome? Well, she cert'nly was at half-past twelve last night, 'cause I drove her here, and saw her get out, and then drove the gen'leman into town. Well, it's all right, I've no doubt.'

The garden up which Alizon walked (it was now about a quarter before twelve) might with care have been made into a very pretty and attractive one. There were several good trees about the house and at the side of the lawn. The grass was thick, and there were tempting-looking borders for flowers—tempting, that is, to any one who had had any love for such things. The whole aspect of the place, however, was one of neglect. The thick grass was rather long and shaggy-looking, the beds were full of weeds, a few vagrant tufts of spring flowers certainly did 'spring up here and there,' and near the house a fine laburnum was putting forth the first tinge of a plentiful rain of golden blossom.

The house itself, though not large, was of a tasteful, dainty description, built of the grey stone which is abundant in the quarries near Kirkfence. There was a pleasant verandah running across the front windows; about its poles clung the neglected remains of last year's fugitive climbing-plants. The lace curtains in the windows, originally good and expensive, hung limp and far from fresh in hue. The sun streamed directly upon the entire front of the house, and all the windows in sight were closed.

As Alizon went very slowly up the walk, and saw all these things, not for the first time, she gave a deep, angry sigh.

'What's the use?' she asked herself in her own mind. 'There's nothing so true as the old Scripture: "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?" And if the leopard and the Ethiopian were just single units, with no others in question, it would not matter so much. But——'

Here she walked up the two or three steps, stood in the porch, and pulled the bell. She had to wait several minutes before something of a scuffle was heard inside, and then the door was opened by an untidy-looking maid, with the most honest, good-natured face in the world. Behind, clinging to her skirts, was a little girl who peeped round at the visitor.

'Eh, Miss Blundell, is't you?' said the girl. 'We never expected you—I don't know why. Will you come in?'

'Is Mrs. Blundell in?' asked Alizon, striving with all her might to draw a softer expression over her face.

'Yes, ma'am, she is. She's not down yet, though. She was at the theatre last night, and didn't get back while late; so she's had her breakfast in bed.'

Alizon, who had entered during this harangue, made absolutely no reply. The servant shut the door, and, trying to pull into view the young person who still held her skirts and impeded her every movement, said, coaxingly, with her broad Yorkshire accent:

'Eh, now, Maudie—Miss Maud, I mean—don't you go hidin' i' that gate, but turn round and speak pretty to your auntie. She's come o' purpose to see ye.'

'Auntie Alizon!' said the young lady, suddenly, loudly and emphatically, as if she were pronouncing some most astounding fact. Then silence supervened, and, as if overcome by her own daring, she retired again behind the sheltering skirts.

Alizon, suddenly stooping down, with one strong, sweeping action, lifted her into her arms, and held her tight, saying:

'All right, Martha. Go and tell your mistress I am here. And you, my Maudie, come with me. Where's Saxon?'

'Don to have his lessons wiv Miss Smif,' said Maudie, who, once in Alizon's arms, seemed quite contented there.

Her aunt carried her into one of the rooms looking upon the garden; it should have been a pretty room in the modern style, for all the furniture was good and well chosen, and there was plenty of it, but the trail of neglect was over it all.

Alizon looked drearily around.

'And why are not you with Miss Smith, too, my precious?' she asked, kissing the blooming, peach-blossom cheek with eagerness, as she scanned every item of the little one's dress and appearance, with the mental comment, 'Clean and whole and tidy—skin and clothes and all—if shabby. Blessed Miss Smith! I'll strengthen her hands if I can.'

'Tause muvver wanted me to play wiv her,' explained Maud, with absolute contentment and calm self-importance.

'Oh!' was the somewhat short reply, as Alizon seated herself in an armchair with the child still in her arms, and endeavoured to lose sight of the untidiness and disorder of the room, with its lingering odour of coffee and roast meat, and food in general, in a close contemplation of the glowing child-beauty so trustfully reposing in her arms.

For the little one was very lovely—four years old perhaps, healthy, hearty, and wholesome, with satiny, dimpled cheeks, a mass of glinting, curly, gold-brown hair, hazel eyes, full of spirit and laughter, a sweet, gentle, intelligent expression; in short, as lovable a little puss as ever lay in a mother's arms, or scrambled about a father's shoulders and pulled his moustache or slapped his face. But Maudie did not often lie in her mother's arms, and when once or twice a comparison of her own circumstances and surroundings with those of other little girls had induced her to ask: 'Where's my papa?' she had always been told that 'papa was away, and nobody knew when he would come back.'

'Are you glad to see auntie?' asked Alizon, and most of the hardness had vanished from her face.

'Yes,' was the prompt reply. 'I seed you coming——'

'Saw, darling! saw you coming.'

'I faw you coming from muvver's window, and I said, "Dere's Auntie Alizon,"'—with great emphasis. 'And muvver let the comb tumble down, and said, "What! Auntie Alizon! Oh, bovver!"'

Alizon gave a short laugh. That the account was as true as it was guileless, she was absolutely certain.

'And will mother soon be down, do you think?' she asked.

'Yes. She's doing her hair. It was nearly done. Den she will put on her blue dessing-gown; she said so; and den she's coming down.'

'Coming as soon as she has put on her blue dressing-gown, eh? Then we will wait till she comes, shall we? Will you stay with me?'

'Yes. I love you, Aunt Alizon,' said Maud, frankly and promptly. After which, she laid her head upon Alizon's breast, reposing in her encircling arm, and became quite still. Though full of health and spirits, she was free from nervous restlessness, and, when in a position or in company that met her views, could be still and silent by the hour together.

Alizon drew her arm more closely around the little form, stroking the glistening curls, and now and then brushing them with her lips. She, too, became silent; the magic of the little being nestling up to her sent her off into a reverie—a blessed, soothing dream of what might be. For the space of some ten minutes she forgot where she really was—forgot the jar, the discord, the friction—and thought of many things, wished and yearned for many things.

Then a slow step came towards the door; it was opened, and

a young woman dressed in a flowing morning robe of light-blue appeared within it—a young woman whose abundant hair was of a wonderful 'red' tint, whose eyes were as blue as her wrapper, whose skin was as white as cream, and whose expression was languid and discontented; her general aspect—despite her finery, and though she had only just left her room—was slovenly. She was the mother of little Maud, and of Saxon, the boy, who was now doing his lessons with 'Miss Smif.' She was Mrs. Peregrine Blundell, *née* Nelly Armitage. She was a wronged woman; a neglected wife, placed in a false position; and to her sister-in-law she seemed the most galling, agonising thorn in the side that could possibly exist.

Alizon Blundell, since she had taken this matter in hand, with her customary vigour and thoroughness, felt herself responsible for Nelly's entire life and conduct. She had to do her thinking for her, to make her decisions, to control her tendencies to extravagance, to whip up her utter indolence and indifference into some kind of order and system, and, worst and hardest of all, to keep her pacified, to control her frequent outbursts of passionate indignation or fretful rebellion against her position, and, supreme task, to prevent her from intruding into Peregrine's presence, as she often declared she would, to 'tell him her mind,' and make a frightful scene which might perhaps cost him his life.

It was this young woman who now came slowly forward, shutting the door behind her with a bang, and meeting her sister-in-law's glance with one of her own, expressive of anything but welcome or pleasure.

CHAPTER XX.

ORDEAL BY FIRE.

'Well, Nelly,' said her visitor, half rising from her chair, and speaking with some constraint, 'how are you?'

'Middling, thank you,' replied Nelly, with a kind of fretful indifference, and in a hopelessly common accent. Her beauty, or rather prettiness, which was considerable, taken in conjunction with this accent and all it implied, and with Peregrine Blundell's character, eager after novelty, fastidious to the last degree as to all his permanent surroundings, might explain a good deal to a near observer.

Nelly did not ask Alizon how she did, but came slowly forward, and took her seat on a sofa opposite the chair on which the other sat.

'Maudie says she hasn't been to Miss Smith this morning.'

'No, she hasn't.' (There was the suspicion of a want of aspiration in Nelly's h's, more distressing, perhaps, than even its complete absence.) 'I never seem to see the child, what with lessons all day with Miss Smith, and going to bed so early as she does, and everything. I wanted to talk to her.'

Alizon said nothing. It was not the first time she had heard the complaint; not the first time, either, that she had noticed how easily Nelly was able to dispense with her child's society except just when it occurred to her that Miss Smith was a bore and an interloper; not the first time, either, that Maudie had contentedly remained with her (or with Miss Smith) while her mother sat by.

'Well, perhaps she might go to her now,' said Alizon, slowly, at last. 'They will be taking their walk, I suppose, this fine day, even if she has done no lessons. Run away, love, to Miss Smith and Saxon. I shall come in to say good-bye to you.'

Maudie went, obediently enough, with a parting kiss from her aunt. Then the two women were left by themselves. Conversation did not flow very freely between them. Why, indeed, should it have done so? Why should an ignorant, angry, injured woman have much to say to another woman who represented to her mind the man who had injured, insulted, and neglected her; a woman, who, moreover, was so disagreeably strong and determined; always holding her—Nelly—back from the method she longed to pursue with regard to her recalcitrant husband; always preaching to her of her children's welfare, and of her duty to them; always, in short, making herself disagreeable? Nelly had not married to shut herself up with her children, and obliterate herself in order to secure their future prosperity. She had married to cast behind her her tedious, insignificant position as a nursery governess, and to take instead that of a petted wife and a lady of position. She had been shamefully tricked and cheated. She had done nothing wrong, and yet her husband had turned against her. She had lived about in one place and another, but only for a very short time in her rightful one. For a brief half-year once, before the breach between her and Peregrine had grown impassable, she had reigned at Undermoor, and, though ill at ease there, she had liked the dignity and importance it gave her. It was he who had changed, she had never changed, she

told herself, with tragi-comic indignation; it was he who had changed. Such as she had been when he first met her, such she had continued to be. She had been good enough then to be married, why was she not good enough now to be with him? Of course she could not understand that it was no change in her which had brought about Peregrine's disgust, but simply the awakening to what exactly she was.

'Aren't you going out this morning?' Alizon asked her.

It was curious (and sad) to observe the difference in Alizon's manner to this person and that which she had towards any one else. That quick, brusque tone which characterised her gave place now to a slow, rather hesitating accent. It was her sense of uprightness, in rebellion against this wretched state of things, which caused the hesitation. Her tongue was tied by the profound conviction that Nelly—in spite of her disastrous shortcomings, despite Alizon's own love for her brother and her anguish over his ruined life—was a wronged woman. Where she would naturally have pooh-poohed or impatiently cried, 'Don't be a fool!' she forced herself to be civil and smooth-spoken because Nelly was very greatly wronged. On the other hand, there was Peregrine, her only brother, whom she adored, in spite of, or perhaps even because of, his weakness, as compared with her own strength, and whom she pitied with a profound, immeasurable pity for many things. For these reasons she hesitated often in speaking to Nelly, and was not the self-possessed, decided creature known by the world in general.

'Going out? No!' said Nelly, who was, as Alizon saw, in one of her worst and discontented humours. That meant misery, ill-temper, deafness to all rational argument, obdurate complainings, and a fixed resolve not to see that any one but herself could have anything to complain of. Alizon braced herself, mentally, to meet it. She saw it was going to be bad. It always was bad; but to-day it would be somewhat worse than usual—that was all. 'What should *I* go out for?' asked Nelly, swinging her foot, and tapping the back of the sofa with her fingers.

'For your health's sake, I suppose.'

'I don't care anything about my health. What is the good of bothering about your health when you can't enjoy it, or anything else? Take a walk, indeed! and then come in and sit mewed up here, without a soul to speak to. So interesting!'

'I am sure Miss Smith——'

'Miss Smith is very superior to me,' said Nelly, raising her

voice into a thinner, higher key. 'I'm quite aware how very clever Miss Smith is. But, you see, I'm not. I don't feel able to talk about history and philosophy. Philosophy forsooth! I went into the schoolroom once, when I was so dull that I didn't know what to do, and thought I'd have a bit of a talk with Miss Smith. But when a person is reading "Thirlwall's History of Greece"' (with profound contempt), 'and looks as sour as sour at being interrupted, there isn't much encouragement. No, Miss Smith and I are not suitable companions. I'd rather talk to Martha any day.'

Alizon suppressed the reply: 'I have not the least doubt of it, and much more suitable to your capacities Martha would be,' and said, with a desperate effort to look good-natured:

'Well, Martha tells me you were at the theatre last night; so you have some distractions?'

'Yes, I was at the theatre last night,' said Nelly, with a sudden slight change in her manner, which rather surprised Alizon. 'It's very poor is the theatre here,' Mrs. Blundell went on, rather hurriedly. 'Give me the London theatres; there's no others worth going to.'

'I daresay poor Miss Smith would have a better opinion than you of the Kirkfence theatres.'

'Miss Smith—oh, she was not there. She was reading the "History of Greece," I daresay. I went with a party; those Arrowsmiths, who live a *little* further on. There were a dozen of us; they had some gentlemen with them, so I had an escort home——'

Alizon heard this with a sudden feeling of apprehension. That Nelly loved admiration she knew, but this proclivity had displayed itself hitherto in very mild and innocent forms, for which her sister-in-law had been devoutly thankful. This, however, might mark the beginning of a new era. In any case it seemed to her most unseemly that her brother's wife should be going to the theatre in this style. Despite Nelly's obvious ill-humour, she felt obliged to say something.

'Don't you really think it would be better to take Miss Smith with you, and then you would not need any escort home? You could take a box for her and you, and be as private as you pleased.'

Nelly laughed rather a shrill laugh, not devoid of a sound of tears in the background.

'I daresay we should, and precious dull it would be. Might just as well stay at home. I must say I prefer the company of an amusing man to that of Miss Smith. No! when I do

break loose, I like really to enjoy myself. You won't let me go to Peregrine and tell him what my feelings are about his behaviour——'

'It would kill him,' said Alizon, in a low tone which had anguish in it.

'And you won't tell him his duty yourself.'

'You know I tell him as much as I can; and you know what he is when he has made up his mind against a thing.'

'Yes, I fancy I do. I've had reason to. But what are you blaming me for?' she asked, excitedly, her face flushing and her eyes looking angry. 'Because he behaved like a villain, am I to give up every scrap of pleasure? It's little enough that I get, living here like a widow and a nobody when I ought to be a lady of position, and all because he has behaved abominably —not me—and then goes and takes an illness and mustn't be annoyed for fear it should kill him. It's a cowardly way of behaving, in my opinion. I've done nothing wrong, and I'm not going to behave as if I had, or turn into a nun, or anything of that sort. He ought to be told the truth, even if it did kill him.'

It will be observed that Nelly's words breathed more of indignant personal injury than of blighted love or wounded affection. Alizon knew it all, and could have said, 'You never loved him. You married him for what he could give you, and you are rightly served in not having secured it.' But she had not the heart to make the retort. The other side of the question was too horribly, too vividly true to her and present with her—the woman's side of the question. She was by nature intensely loyal to her sex, and circumstances had fostered this loyalty into a passion. What Nelly said was so true to her, her sense of injury done to the wife was so strong, that her tongue was paralysed for any *tu quoque*. Useless to fly out and rebuke, reproach, and threaten. The old, oft-tried weapon of conciliation must be taken up once more. Nelly must be, if possible, propitiated into acquiescence—until the next time.

'Nelly, you know I have never defended Peregrine. You know I understand how he has wronged you. But what is the use of crying out what ought to be? It is what is that we have to face and consider. If there were only yourself and him in the question, I should be inclined to risk a good deal to put you into a more suitable position. But you know the difficulty. You lose your temper and your head, and, in pressing home your own wrongs, you forget your little children. Oh, Nelly, never forget that he has the power to disinherit them and leave them without a penny; wronged and crippled for all their lives.'

Alizon was not aware of the two photographs which Peregrine had showed to Godfrey. She knew a great deal, but not all the workings of her brother's mind.

'It must not be. I would do almost anything rather than that it should ever come to pass. And you, their mother—surely you can make yourself have the patience to wait till—till——'

'Till he shall be dead,' was what she had in her mind. It was what they both thought. Nelly looked angry and sulky.

'It's so miserable!' she said at last, with almost a wail. 'It's so wretched, to be always feeling that you are not what you seem to be. Of course I do not want the children to be left penniless. It would be a crying sin and shame. But you would never leave them penniless.'

'What do you mean?'

'If Peregrine died,' said Nelly, in a hard voice, 'and was so wicked, and so vexed with me, all for nothing, that he left all his money away from the children just on purpose to spite me—and he's quite capable of it, I know'—Alizon's face did not change, but her inmost soul was writhing—'pray, who else could he leave it to, but you?'

The young lady, in her enforced solitude and inaction, had evidently been developing her calculating powers, and she looked at Alizon as if to say:

'Don't think I can't see into things quite as well as you.'

Her sister-in-law's reply was swift and cold.

'Do not calculate on that for a minute,' she said, with decisiveness in her tones. 'He can leave it exactly as he pleases. If you will but have the patience and resolution to wait, and follow my directions, it will be left to you and your children—as it ought to be. If you disregard what I tell you and rouse that obstinate animosity of his, and exasperate him beyond bounds, he will take very good care that it does not go to you and your children, nor to me nor to any one who would share it with you. I have told you this so often before, Nelly. Do you think I like repeating it? Do you think it is a pleasant thing to have to say?'

Nelly's foot had been working more and more rapidly. She now suddenly stamped on the floor, flung her face on to a crumpled crewel-work antimacassar, and burst into tears of rage and mortification.

'It's a shame, it's a shame!' she gasped. 'And me, that has done nothing to deserve it! I believe you are on his side. I believe the two of you combine to cheat me out of what I ought to have. You are jealous of me. You know I ought

to be in his house now, nursing him, if he's such an invalid. And you know, too, that if I were there, you'd have to go. You would have to leave Undermoor, and you do your best to keep me out of it. He's like wax in your hands, and you keep me away from him.'

Alizon sat quite still during this outburst. She hardly breathed. She hardly knew where she was. All her mental powers were concentrated on the effort to bear the torture without turning upon her who inflicted it and crushing her—morally—to atoms, as she so easily could have done, had she put forth her strength. In the midst of it all a small voice within her kept asking importunately:

'Why—why do I endure this? Why do I not let go the reins and leave them to it?'

Her face grew terribly white and set in its expression during those few moments of supreme anguish.

'Poor Nelly!' she said, at last, in a low untrembling voice. 'You know you don't think that. It is a pity you should say it. It is saying things like that to Peregrine that makes it hopeless for you to go near him. You know I am telling the truth.'

Yes, Nelly knew it, very well. The nature of the woman came out clearly at this juncture. She dried her eyes and sat up once more, observing:

'Well, at any rate, I don't see why I should be more miserable and dull than I'm obliged to. And I'm thinking of giving Miss Smith notice.'

'Giving Miss Smith notice!' repeated Alizon, even her presence of mind startled away for a moment. 'Why, pray?'

'Well, I should think you might see she's no congenial friend for me. She's so dreadfully grave and serious—very kind, I know, and when Saxon was ill she did nurse him splendidly. But she's so lofty. It's like living with a princess, who has taken a governess's situation to try how it feels. I want some one who will be a companion to me, as well as teaching the children. They are so young. Some one much less experienced than Miss Smith—and less expensive, too—would do for them. Miss Smith has a hundred a year—and I daresay she deserves it in some ways. But Mrs. Arrowsmith told me of a very nice girl, a friend of theirs, full of life and fun, who plays very nicely and wants a situation. Her father is a clergyman. Miss Smith's father is a professor of ethics, or something, and has no religion at all, I'm told; and this girl, Miss Mason, would come for twenty, and do all sorts of things that Miss Smith would turn up her nose at,' finished Nelly, breathlessly.

She had evidently set her heart very much on this thing. Alizon felt that never before had she had such a trying visit to her sister-in-law. Miss Smith was her sheet-anchor—her mainstay, in this abnormal household. Miss Smith was doing for Saxon and Maudie what their mother could never do for them. She was staunch, she was steady, she was capable and innately noble-minded. Alizon had found herself able to speak to Miss Smith almost easily about things which it was not as a rule possible to her to speak of at all. No wonder that Nelly found her utterly uncongenial. Perhaps it was no wonder that Nelly should wish to replace her with a young person of nineteen, who could laugh and play waltzes, who would gossip and dressmake with her, and neglect the children, and all for the sum of twenty pounds a year.

'You would save eighty pounds a year,' said Nelly, persuasively.

With all her fretful outcries and passionate accusations of her sister-in-law, she was dominated by her. She dared not make this change unknown to Alizon; nay, she knew she could not make it without Alizon's consent. The latter somehow forced the truth from her; as when, much against her own will, she had mentioned the gentleman who had been one of the party last night, and how one of them had driven home with her. She hated the domination and resented it, but she had to obey it.

'Save eighty pounds a year!' said Alizon, contemptuously, 'as if that were anything to the point! If Miss Smith cost two hundred, she would have to have it. You must not send her away, Nelly—you must not, indeed. Every time I think of you and your children, I reflect with some comfort that Miss Smith is here. And, besides, it is not fitting that they should have a mere nursery governess. If children don't need an experienced person to take care of them, I know of no one who does. Surely, too, you don't want to introduce another stranger into this house!'

Nelly was very angry, but she saw it was useless to press the point. Alizon did not choose that Miss Smith should go. She, Nelly, must continue to lead her dull and dreary existence as before—in order that some day some one else might be benefited by it. She dared not mention Miss Mason again. But some kind of revenge she must have.

'Very well,' she said, sullenly. 'I knew I was a cipher in my own house—a nobody. I'd best go where nobodies had better be—to my own room. I'll leave you and Miss Smith to

manage my affairs for me, since you know them so much better than I do myself. But I can tell you,' she went on, rising, and with the colour high in her face, 'this shall not go on for ever. I'm his lawful wife, and I shall have my privileges. You shall find, some day soon, that I'm not to be treated in this way for nothing. You shall hear something from me that you won't like, either of you. Yes, you shall, as sure as my name is Ellen Blundell.'

She flung open the door, and walked out of the room and away, leaving Alizon alone to the bitterness of her own thoughts, and to repeat again and again to herself:

'What can be done? What am I to do with them both?'

CHAPTER XXI.

AFTERWARDS.

Miss Smith and the children came in, and the early dinner was put on the table. Two or three words and a look sufficed to explain to the governess that there had been a stormy scene. Alizon left directly after the meal was over. She gathered the little ones to her, and kissed them, and spoke with affectionate respect to Miss Smith, and all the time her heart was crying out for these children who knew no father and no true mother; who were thus placed through the obstinate recklessness of those who should have been their guides and stays.

She was in time for an earlier train than the one she had intended to travel by, and, upon her return, she did not go into the house, but went and sat by the fishponds, where Godfrey had found her in a keenly rebellious state of mind, feeling her burden, not greater than she could bear, for she was very strong, and knew her strength, but wondering bitterly why it all was —this misery in the world, these 'mountain growths, disease and sorrow,' or want for some, or madness for others, or vicarious suffering for the sins of their kindred for yet others—all phases of the same great discord in nature and life—all signs of the want of balance between man and his environment. The question was often present with her—this Why? Why?—which no man has ever yet succeeded in answering, and it had never been more vividly so than this afternoon. Then, when Godfrey appeared in the midst of her painful reverie, and she

had roused from it sufficiently to see his distress at having unwittingly intruded upon her, she had endeavoured to set him at his ease, and so the spell of her pain had got temporarily broken. To her, the difference between what she had that morning gone through, and the calm, evenly poised, and eminently sane influence which seemed to be about all Godfrey said or did, was inexpressively soothing.

Despite the darkness which still clouded her face when she went in, the little episode had done her good—had brought a kind of healing with it. She had long ago come to the conclusion that this misery about Peregrine's wife was a thing which would have to be borne so long as Nelly and he both lived. There was no cure for it—no mending and no ending of it—from the nature of the case. He could not be restored to health, and made strong enough himself to suffer the punishment for his own sin, folly, and selfishness. Nelly could not be raised to an equality with the needs of the situation; she could not be transformed into a high-minded, or educated, or unselfish woman. Nothing could change the nature of either, and, from the circumstances of the thing, it was upon Alizon that the chief wretchedness of it fell. That she had firmly drilled herself to consider an unchangeable, unalterable fact, and she had never looked to any one for help in the matter. But this afternoon, as she had walked through the dark tunnel homewards, after parting with Godfrey, there stole into her mind a wonder, partaking of the nature of a hope.

'Would Peregrine ever like that young man well enough to tell him the truth about himself and her? And, in that case, could the man, as a medical adviser, who knows how to say things, or rather who may say things, without offence which other people may not—could he get him in any way to do anything that is right? If he could . . . . if it should ever be so! . . . .'

She shook her head, as she went in at the hall-door, but the ray of hope had entered. It may be remarked that Alizon's wildest dreams on the subject of Peregrine's 'doing right,' extended no further than a dim hope that he might some time be persuaded to let Nelly come to Undermoor as its mistress, with her children, and he himself consent to be, for at any rate some short interval during the year, under the same roof with her; even if they did not exchange a word during that interval. But such was his almost insensate resolve to keep away from his wife, and to have her kept away from him, that Alizon, after an occasional indulgence in this dream, always ended by deciding that it was a dream—nothing more.

Dinner was over that same evening at the establishment, and Godfrey, resolved to do his duty by the committee, distasteful though he now found his post, determined to pass some little time in the drawing-room. He was aware that the people who frequent such places, having, with few exceptions, little or nothing to think of but themselves and their own consequence and importance, consider themselves slighted unless they receive some attention from the medical man of the establishment. Moorside was not on such an eminence of popularity, its physician was not so powerful as to be able to disregard these prejudices with impunity, and he knew this. He smothered the extreme dislike he felt to all the company he had yet spoken to, except Mrs. Van Bibber and her brother, and when dinner was over repaired to the drawing-room with the others. The entertainment was of the most meagre description. One young lady sang of how she wandered down the mountain side—sang in a hoarse, tuneless voice, which made Godfrey feel very ill indeed, and inclined to howl aloud out of the anguish of his soul. Then a whist-table was arranged, and he consented to take a hand, hoping thereby to escape worse things. He speedily found that he had but rushed from Scylla to be swallowed up in Charybdis. Mrs. Van Bibber was his partner, and opposed to them were Harold Ashby and Mrs. Capstick, the lady with the injured wrist, who understood the game and managed the cards cleverly despite her lameness. A clergyman from one of the local churches, who had come to call upon Godfrey, sat near to him and Mrs. Van Bibber, and watched the game. They had played two or three hands, when suddenly, during a deal of Harold Ashby's, Mrs. Capstick turned to Godfrey, and said, in a loud voice:

'I hear you've been goin' to Blundells' two or three times. How do you like them?'

'Are they friends of yours?' he asked, without any change of countenance.

'Friends of mine, no! Colonel Capstick, my husband, knows their family quite well. He used to be quite a chum of his: and they know I am here. But they're simply uncivilised. If Miss Blundelll wasn't the rudest woman in the world, she would have been to call upon me before now. But she has no manners, and never had.'

'You seem to have formed your opinion of them, so it is scarcely necessary for me to give mine,' he said, tranquilly, resolved not to answer her impertinence.

But her own reflection on Miss Blundell's want of manners

had flushed her cheek and excited her mind, and she went on:

'Well, I should say decent people could have only one opinion about *him*, at any rate. And they do say she eggs him on in his wickedness. His conduct to his wife is a crying scandal, if ever there was one. Don't you agree with me, Mr. Lucas?'

'I think it would be better to fight out the rubber than to discuss our neighbours' affairs,' replied the clergyman, with a moral courage which caused Godfrey to feel the deepest respect for him.

Mrs. Capstick, however, was not to be so easily suppressed, and was angry at having her delicate questions baffled by first one and then another of the men.

'Discussin', indeed! The thing is, how to avoid seeing a thing like that,' she said, much offended, laying her cards down and looking from one to the other of them.

Thus she had them at great disadvantage; as rude and unscrupulous persons always may have those who are more patient and better behaved than themselves. The three men all heaved profound sighs; Godfrey and young Ashby studied their cards with a careworn expression. Mrs. Van Bibber, furling hers into a little bundle, lightly clasped her hands over them; the jewels on her fingers flashed and sparkled as she leaned a very little forward, with her head slightly inclined to one side, and her eyes fixed with calm, unimpassioned inquiry on Mrs. Capstick, who, suddenly catching her eye, said:

'You, as a woman, will agree with me, I'm sure, Mrs. Van Bibber.'

'I am not acquainted with the story,' said Mrs. Van Bibber, 'except in so far as I have heard that there is a Mr. Blundell who is unhappily married, and who declines to live with his wife. And I'm not interested in it, for I don't know them.'

'In a moment of impulsiveness, years ago,' said Mrs. Capstick; with engaging candour, 'he acted with greater honesty than was natural to him, and married a poor young woman, who was half lady's-maid, half nursery governess to some people at Kirkfence. After raising her thus above her station, and after having two children by her, my lord discovers that she is not good enough for him, and that the very sight of her makes him ill. Those illnesses of his are a fine excuse for shirking his duty as a husband and father. His sister took his part, of course. It suited her to be mistress of Great Undermoor, and

it would not have suited her to play second fiddle to a little girl like that.' (Godfrey remembered Giles Barras's words to him, 'she never troubled Undermoor, except when there was plenty going on to make it worth her while.') 'On the pretext that it was as much as his life was worth to be troubled and annoyed in any way, or to have scenes with his wife—he treated her with awful brutality, I'm told—it ill becomes you to laugh at such a thing, Dr. Noble—they agreed upon the present plan. And I wonder what else there was for the poor thing to do. He had all the money, and the power, and the position; he simply laid down his terms, and she had to submit to them, if you call that agreeing. So he lives on at Great Undermoor, surrounded by every kind of luxury, and encouraged in his brutality by his sister, while the unfortunate wife has to pinch and screw, and worry with her two children—whom he won't even look at—in a miserable little jerry-built house in the dreariest outskirt of Kirkfence. No pleasure, no position, no rights. While his sister, who is sitting in her place, is *the* lady of this neighbourhood. If that's not a scandal, I should like to know what is,' concluded Mrs. Capstick, triumphantly, as she fixed her eye so uncompromisingly on the parson that he was forced to reply to her.

'My dear madam, there must always be more or less scandal when the laws of the Church, of Society, and of Almighty God are openly set at defiance,' said he. 'But it is not for us to judge——'

She laughed sarcastically. Mrs. Van Bibber, leaning back in her chair, said, quietly:

'You said if Miss Blundell had had any manners she would have called upon you, Mrs. Capstick. Surely, if she had, you wouldn't have received such a monster. Or perhaps she might have been able to explain. If she had asked you to dinner, for instance, and explained—things might have looked quite different.'

She smiled pensively.

'I have given my views on the subject, and I really don't know why we are neglecting the game in this way. Are we playing whist, or are we not?' cried Mrs. Capstick, red and angry.

Mrs. Van Bibber did not smile again. She opened out her cards and the rubber was played out, when Godfrey, sickened to the soul by what he had had to listen to, rose, and almost without excuse, said he would play no more. The clergyman, Mr. Lucas, said he would go, and Godfrey walked out with

him, and down to the gate. He was more deeply perturbed than he had almost ever been in his life; and his perturbation showed itself in an almost involuntary exclamation:

'Brute of a woman! How I should have liked to strangle her!' he said.

'Do you mean Mrs. Capstick? She is not fascinating, I must say. I think, however, that Mrs. Van Bibber hit her pretty hard. If you noticed, that silenced her.'

'It did. I hope it hurt her too,' he said, vindictively. 'Good-bye. Forgive my language. There's nothing I hate more than a loose tongue, and the unscrupulous use of it.'

They parted. Godfrey stayed out of doors till it was dark, and then went to read in his own room. He felt unable to face 'that crew,' as he called them to himself, again that night.

On the morrow, walking towards the village, after his consulting hours, he met Giles Barras, just going towards the gate of Great Undermoor. Giles stopped, and greeted him cordially.

'Will you come round and see me this afternoon, if you have nothing better to do?' he said. 'I am going in now to ask them to come out and take a dish of tea with me. Miss Blundell sometimes does me the honour, and it makes an object for him in his drive.'

'Thank you. I shall be delighted. But how am I to know whether they are coming?'

'Well, it won't make any difference in my invitation to you,' said Giles, laughing. 'I'll expect you, anyhow.'

Returning from his errand, Godfrey met old Baker, the butler at Great Undermoor. He inquired of him how Mr. Blundell was.

'Well, sir, he seemed all right this morning, but he fell off all at once. I'm going back now. It's nearly lunch time. I hope he will be able to go to Mr. Barras's this afternoon.'

Godfrey decided not to go to the manor till he had ascertained how Peregrine might be nearer the time. He accordingly set off rather early, made his way through the tunnels to the front of the house, and rang the bell. He had no intention of going in, unless he should hear that Peregrine was really ill. Baker opened the door to him, and his prim and faithful countenance wore an expression of care.

'I just came to ask again how Mr. Blundell is—I don't want to come in,' Godfrey had begun, when all at once Alizon appeared just behind Baker, and advanced to the front. Her face wore the expression it usually had when she was angered or annoyed; no frown or contortion or pout, but an expression

which seemed to say—'I do not know what a smile is. I never have smiled. I never shall smile.' Yet she could smile, as Godfrey well knew.

'Dr. Noble,' she said, abruptly. 'I saw you pass the window. Will you come in? I want to speak to you.'

'I came to ask after your brother,' he began again.

'Yes. You are very kind, and you come just at the right moment. Baker, go and tell Mr. Peregrine that if he will wait for me upstairs five minutes I will go to him, and the carriage will be round in ten.'

Baker departed. Alizon and Godfrey were left alone. Her face instantly changed. A look of relief came over it.

'Listen! I want you to do something for me. I want you to do something very disagreeable, too.'

'Let me hear what it is,' he said, with a smile.

'Just this. In that room'—she pointed to the drawing-room door—'sits my sister-in-law, Mrs. Blundell. You know about her?' she added, suddenly.

'Very little. I know there is such a person.'

'Good! Well, she has lost her head, and come here with the intention of seeing her husband, and that must not be allowed to happen. In ten minutes we shall be safely out of the house. What I want you to do is to go in there and take her off my hands, and manage her till it is time to go to the four-ten train to Kirkfence. I will give orders for a carriage to come round, and then I want you to go with her to the station, and see her start in that train. You will have to give up your visit to Mr. Barras, and appear to be very rude to him, but you can explain that after. To the lady in there I give you leave to say anything you may think best. Will you?'

'Certainly, I will.'

'Baker shall let you know when we have set off. Then you will not be in suspense. Baker knows all about it,' she added. 'I must not wait another moment. Come! I will just introduce you to her.'

CHAPTER XXII.

GODFREY AND NELLY.

YES, Nelly was there, seated in an easy-chair, her pretty face all flushed, her dress in the height of fashion, without much sing about it of the 'pinching and screwing' spoken of by Mrs.

Capstick, her foot tapping the floor impatiently. She looked up as they entered, and a flash of some sort of feeling passed over her face—a shock, it seemed to Godfrey—and she changed colour a little. Was it possible that for a second's space she imagined the man who came in behind Alizon to be her husband? If so, she was quickly undeceived. She sat upright, looking both angry and embarrassed.

'Nelly, I am called off to Peregrine, who is not at all well to-day. I am afraid he won't be able to see you. This is Dr. Noble; he is Peregrine's doctor now, and he will tell you all you want to know about him—about his health, and all that. Dr. Noble, Mrs. Blundell. You will excuse me for ten minutes?' she added, to Nelly, as she turned to go.

'Oh, I suppose so,' said Nelly, discontentedly; and Alizon, without more ado, left them.

Godfrey found himself confronted by a pretty, angry, and injured young woman, with a difficult part to play in regard to her.

'This sort of nonsense always goes on when I come over here,' said Nelly, darkly. 'Most extraordinary that my husband should always be ill when I want to see him. How long have you known him?' she suddenly demanded.

'Two or three weeks.'

'Oh, then, you haven't been here long. Pray tell me—you look as if one might depend upon what you said—if it is true that he is so dangerously ill?'

'Perfectly true. It is more than a dangerous—it is a mortal illness.'

'Mortal—that means, he will die,' said Nelly, under her breath.

'Yes, sooner or later that disease always kills.'

'And is it true that any excitement or vexation is so bad for him?'

'It is the worst thing he could have. I see you look at me doubtfully. But it is an absolute fact that the person who seriously disturbed or irritated him might be the immediate and responsible cause of his death.'

These were grave words. Even Nelly seemed subdued by them into less impatience. The irritating influence exerted over her by Alizon was absent there, and she paused, reflected, and at last said, in a low voice:

'I wonder if I shall get to see him to-day. I would try to keep quiet.'

'I think it is very doubtful,' he said, judicially. 'Miss

Blundell will doubtless let us know presently how he is. He was ill this morning. That was why I came to ask after him just now.'

'Don't you think that, even though Mr. Blundell and I may not agree about everything, it is very strange that I should not be allowed to live here?' suddenly demanded Nelly, who was simply devoid of delicacy in such matters; a trait in her character which, almost more than anything, had embittered Peregrine against her. Godfrey, who had an eye for character, began to see what she was, and realised that he must argue with her from her standard, not from his own.

'I can give you no opinion about it,' he said, candidly. 'I am a new-comer here, and I attend Mr. Blundell professionally. It is not for me to judge in his family affairs.'

'But you must have heard things, or Miss Blundell would not have spoken so openly as she did just now.'

'I have heard a great many things. There are probably as many lies told up at Moorside in one month as all Kirkfence tells in a year. I never attach the least importance to anything I may hear there.'

'The fact is,' said Nelly, 'that it is a dreadfully trying position for me to be in.' She put on an air of languid resignation. 'To be left alone with my two poor little ones'—she sighed deeply. Godfrey felt no emotion whatever. The 'two poor little ones' were evidently at this moment part of Nelly's stock-in-trade. They were not as dear to her as was herself. 'With no recognised standing,' Nelly went on, 'and with numbers of people seeking me out. I'm not so old or so ugly yet that I don't care any more for a bit of amusement, now and then. It is very hard.'

'You would not have much amusement here then,' he said, answering her in her own spirit. 'The state of Mr. Blundell's health practically cuts him off from society. His sister is compelled to lead a very quiet life indeed. There is not much gaiety here.'

'Still, I should have my rightful place. There's always something in that,' said Nelly, practically. 'I ought to be entertaining you in this room. After all, it's my own drawing-room, and not hers,' she went on, with some heat, 'and I don't like the way it's arranged, either. She ought to have some small tables, with pretty plush tops—not those horrid, heavy, old-fashioned things, with none of the new colours in them;' and she pointed to a solid small table of ebony and Florentine mosaic. 'She might cover it with a pretty cloth. Ah! I

would change a great deal if I came here. *When* I come here, I will.'

She started up, and looked round. The grotesqueness of the whole business set Godfrey's nerves on edge, even while he could scarcely help laughing at her. At this moment his quick ear caught the low rush of wheels. They did not, from this window, see the carriage drive away. He knew they must have set off. Nelly was far too excited to hear or notice. Directly afterwards Baker came in. Nelly sat down, and looked uncomfortable. With all her sense of being wronged and injured, with all her passionate complainings about being kept out of her own place, she never felt at home at Undermoor. No; it was a grand house; its whole atmosphere different from any she had ever known. It contained menservants with whom she felt ill at ease, and she always had the impulse to say 'please' and 'thank you' very often to Baker, and to accept his services as a great favour.

'Miss Blundell's compliments, ma'am,' said Baker, with imperturbable, expressionless gravity, 'and Mr. Blundell was not well enough to see any one, so he has gone for his drive, as usual, and she has gone with him, and she trusts you will excuse her. The close carriage will be round at four, and Miss Blundell said Dr. Noble would kindly see you to the station, and if you are ready for it I will bring you some tea now.'

'Oh, thank——' began Nelly, awe of the solemn functionary overcoming fury at having been thus cajoled. 'Very well,' she said, in a choking voice.

'You would like some tea, ma'am, at once, I expect?'

'Yes—please.'

He went away. Nelly sat still for two or three minutes—about the most uncomfortable minutes to Godfrey that he had ever spent in his life. Then, suddenly, striking her hand on the arm of her chair:

'It's a shame!' she ejaculated. 'It's a lie she has told. She's always telling her nasty lies, and deceiving me. They talk about her being so truthful. All I can say is, I never knew any one so false as Alizon Blundell is.'

Godfrey said nothing. It was, of course, true enough, from Nelly's point of view. She had been cajoled, deceived, and given the slip. What she did not see, and never would see, was that there could be anything to be said on the other side of the question. Godfrey felt his blood boil uncomfortably as she thus denounced Alizon, but in a lightning-quick flash of thought he asked himself what would Alizon herself have done

in that contingency? Assuredly she would not have answered Nelly with words as intemperate as her own, which was what Godfrey longed to do. He was acting for her, and it behoved him to be at least as circumspect as she would have been.

'They're gone!' pursued Nelly, even more angrily. 'And left no word, of course, where they were going. I call it infamous. I have a good mind to ring for that wretched old butler and tell him that I am going to stay all night, and that they may get a room ready for me.'

She looked at Godfrey as she said this. He clearly read, in her unsteady, excited look, that her speech was mere bravado.

'That might make your family uneasy,' he suggested.

'Yes, that's true,' said Nelly, not sorry to find a way out of her rash threat. 'Well,—it is a shame!' Was there perhaps a trifle of relief in Nelly's mind that, after all, she had not been brought face to face with the husband she had come to see? 'I shall just have to come over again another day, that's all. What is the time now, Dr. Noble?'

'Just half-past three. Time for you to get some tea, as Baker suggested. I hope you will not refuse me the honour of escorting you to the station?'

'Oh, if it won't bore you to spend your time with me,' said Nelly, with a little, conscious laugh; and she looked at him coquettishly. 'If my sister-in-law was obliged to go out, it seems she did provide a substitute. But I don't want to take up your time if you are in any hurry.'

'I am at your service,' he assured her, solemnly; and in a minute or two another phase of the situation forced itself upon his attention.

Nelly, finding that angry protests were not going to serve her turn, and being, moreover, far too much of a coward at heart, far too much in awe of butlers, head-housemaids and the like, to think seriously of carrying out any plan of defiance, such as remaining at Undermoor, had, like a wise woman, resigned herself—for the moment, at any rate—to the inevitable. Alizon was away; she had been explicitly left in charge of this polite and most decidedly good-looking young man; she was conscious of being herself a very pretty young woman, and was not aware that there are styles of prettiness which to some misguided minds are infinitely less agreeable than a great many styles of ugliness. She was by nature a coquette, as soon as a man came within sight; it was only the exceptional conditions of the situation which had up to now diverted her attention from Godfrey himself. Now she was

free to bestow it upon him, and he found, half to his disgust and very much to his amusement, that she was quite willing to carry on a flirtation with him till the time should come for them to part. It lay with him to guide the flirtation into paths on the one hand of quietness and demureness, or, on the other, into loud and fast striding ones, but a flirtation it was to be. She had begun to ask him about the visitors at Moorside, and to rally him on the charms of some imaginary young ladies. Then came a question as to her own age, which she was evidently anxious to have calculated at as low a figure as possible. Godfrey fell in with her humour, kept the affair within bounds, and his own countenance under as decent a restraint as he could, till the tea was done and Nelly was in a mournfully retrospective and sentimental mood, when the carriage was announced, and with all deference and courtesy he handed her into it. Poor Baker looked at him with a wistful eye, above all the gravity of his official demeanour, and Godfrey managed to mutter to him:

'I'll call on my way home with a message for Miss Blundell.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Baker, beneath his breath.

Godfrey followed Nelly. The footman closed the carriage-door. In less than ten minutes they were at the station, but, during that time, Nelly had leisure to survey critically every detail of the carriage and its appointments, to find fault with this and praise the other, and finally, with an angry sigh, to say it was a shame she should be driving away from her own home in what ought to be her own carriage, when she asked nothing better than to come and settle down in her own place, and she was sure she could look after Peregrine's health quite as well as his sister could—or better.

To all of which Godfrey made little answer, and they paced about the platform for the two or three minutes that elapsed before the arrival of the train. Those few minutes were rather a trial. In them Nelly's anger began again to rise; she reviewed the day's adventure, her eager quest and its futile ending, and her indignation broke forth afresh.

'She has managed it this time,' she said, resentfully. 'She has beaten me, and got him out of the way. And I daresay she might do it again. But I can tell her they shall pay attention to me. I'll do something that will make them.' She clenched her teeth, and her colour rose. 'I have friends, whatever she may think; and friends who won't stand by and see me treated in this way. As for him, if he won't see me, he shall hear of me.'

Godfrey did not like the tone in which she spoke, but at the same time he reflected that a person with any deep-laid plot, or with any determination to carry out such plot, would hardly have spoken in that loud and threatening style. He tried to cast a little oil on the troubled waters by saying, very gravely :

'I am sorry you feel so wronged, but I solemnly assure you that patience will be your best weapon. I don't really think you would gain anything by violent action.'

'That is the everlasting cry,' said Nelly, sullenly. '"Have patience." "Wait." I've had patience. I've been waiting for two years and a half, and all she ever says to me is the same thing—that I'm to wait and be patient, for the children's sakes. It's all very well, but I want something for my own sake too . . . . and I will have it.'

Yes, it is quite certain she wanted something for her own sake. Whether she thought of any one but herself in the matter was doubtful.

He handed her into an empty carriage in the train, which now stood waiting, and before it set off, she said, with a more urbane expression, as she held out her hand :

'If ever you come to Kirkfence, Dr. Noble, I should be delighted to see you—to lunch, or tea, or to spend the evening. I mean it, remember !' with a gracious nod and smile.

'You are most kind. Some day I may do myself the honour,' he said, reflecting that, after trusting him with this afternoon's business, Alizon might some day have occasion to send him over to Kirkfence, if she found it inconvenient to go herself. He shook hands with Nelly, waited till the train was out of the station, and then slowly retraced his way to Great Undermoor.

Tell Miss Blundell, when she returns,' he said to Baker, 'that I did exactly as she desired me to do, and it was all quite right. If she wishes, I can tell her about it another time.'

'Yes, sir, thank you. I will take care to tell her.'

Though neither of them betrayed it, yet each knew that this was equivalent to Godfrey's saying, 'She is safely out of the place,' and to Baker's replying, 'Thank God for it !'

As he went back to Moorside, he pondered deeply on it all. With the mental proviso, 'If I know all the circumstances, or all the essential ones,' he came to some very definite conclusions in the matter ; conclusions which, perhaps, he would never have opportunity or justification for speaking out. That was as it might be. Meantime his prevailing sense was one of a pro-

found pity for all three of these uneasy, fevered souls—the woman he loved, and was growing to love more intensely each day, each time that he saw her; the man who was her brother, who had erred so grievously, and now was so resolved not to have the moral courage to make any adequate reparation for his own fault; and not least for the vain, flimsy, disappointed butterfly, beating its unserviceable wings against the hard walls of the prison into which it had flitted, mistaking it for a sun-lighted bower.

CHAPTER XXIII.

DRAWING NEARER.

On the following morning Godfrey received a note from Peregrine.

'Dear Doctor,

'We were cheated out of your company by some foul means yesterday afternoon. There's something about it which I cannot get to the bottom of. But I must have compensation. Will you come and dine with us at eight to-night, and have a try with the chessmen afterwards?

'Yours,

'Peregrine Blundell.'

Godfrey smiled with pleasure. He had taken an extraordinary fancy to Peregrine; even with his eyes wide open to his more glaring shortcomings he had experienced this feeling. It was a habit that a good many people had—a habit which had not been without its bad effect on the young man himself, as was testified to those who knew him, in a thousand ways small and great. Godfrey was aware by now that Peregrine was very weak in some ways—he had a surprising fund of strength in other respects. He was aware, too, of the disastrous consequences which his kind of weakness generally entails—the weakness which in a moment of impulsiveness will seize upon some momentary gratification, while knowing it to be a dangerous one, and while endowed with a keen appreciation in reality of much better things. It was a kind of weakness of which Godfrey himself was by this time incapable; partly from natural indisposition to it, but very greatly because of the long

discipline which had made him, at seven-and-twenty, what he was.

In spite of this knowledge, he had a liking, which he was conscious was rapidly growing into something like affection for his patient. It was partly, perhaps, born of the help and relief he had given him from the first by his professional ministrations. He accepted the invitation with satisfaction, and with a whole-hearted pleasure in knowing that his liking must be to a certain extent returned to have produced the attention, for Peregrine's love for novelties only included novelties which pleased him—none that affected him disagreeably. Not only this: Great Undermoor was to Godfrey a Palace of Delight. Our palaces of delight are relative after all, like most other things. What may be a dull, sordid hovel to one man, may appear a suite of marble halls to another, and *vice versâ*. Which is undoubtedly a truism. Great Undermoor was Godfrey's suite of marble halls, because of the persons who inhabited it, and because of his relations to them and of their attitude towards him.

When he arrived, shortly before eight o'clock, he was shown into the drawing-room, where he found Alizon alone—whether by accident or design he did not inquire within himself, but it was most likely to be the latter. She had ways and means of accomplishing whatever purposes she might have in view. It was quite certain that five minutes' conversation alone with Godfrey would be of great convenience to her just now, and that five minutes' conversation she secured.

'Baker gave me your message yesterday. I am very much obliged to you,' she said.

'I am very happy if I was of any service to you. It was nothing.'

'Of course, you say so. But it was a great deal to me; therefore it cannot be nothing, even to you. Peregrine does not know that you—or she, of course—were in the house at all, then. I said nothing. I managed to tell Mr. Barras you were doing something for me, so he will ask you no questions. As for Peregrine, you must tell him you had an engagement.'

'Yes.'

'You look cold and reserved,' she said, sharply and quickly. 'What are you thinking? That you don't want to be mixed up with anything so odious, necessitating so much shuffling and cheating and so many lies, and which is none of your business after all.'

As he was silent, standing near the fire and looking into it,

she went on in a tone which betokened that she was defending herself.

'Sometimes a lie is necessary. I don't tell them except when they are absolutely necessary. But, when they are, I don't stick at a trifle. There is no sense in that.'

Godfrey did not know how rare were the occasions on which she ever condescended to explain, defend, or justify herself. He did not know it from experience, that is. But he knew it by instinct, and he hated to hear her doing it now.

'I was not thinking about that,' he said. 'It does not matter what I was thinking.'

'Yes, it does. Tell me, for heaven's sake; let *us* be open with one another.'

'I cannot help thinking about it all,' said Godfrey, 'and seeing how miserable it all is. A wonder crossed my mind why you, who are so much stronger than either of them, do not use your influence over him to induce him to—make it up with her.'

She laughed.

'She told me a lot of *her* story,' he added. 'Pray forgive me! I could not help it. I could not tell her to hold her tongue. I had to do the work you had entrusted to me——'

'Of course. I am so strong, you say. My influence over him is, in some respects, *nil*. You don't know the whole wretched story. I don't want him to die; I don't want the children to lose their rights. I can but do as I am doing, under the circumstances. I don't know the why or the wherefore even of my own conduct in the matter. I don't know why I do not want him to die, nor why I don't want the children to lose their rights. There seems no reason why I should have such wishes.'

'You must pardon me for saying that I should think there was ample reason for both in the fact that you love them dearly—both him and his children.'

Alizon opened her eyes upon him with a broad blaze of—what?—anger?—astonishment? For a moment only they rested on his face. Then, in a lower voice, as if she were resolved to pass over and ignore his want of manners in attributing to her such a weakness as that, she went on:

'I often wonder why I don't throw over the whole lot of them, and let them fight it out amongst themselves; let her come over and force her way to him, and clamour for her rights and make a scene, enrage him till he got beyond himself, and was taken ill, and died. I seem to see it, sometimes,' she

added, looking again at Godfrey; 'it is such a horrible scene that rises to my mind. I see him dead—all in a moment—and her, standing there with words of anger on her lips, struck dumb by seeing it happen. It would be what they both deserve, on some theories, I suppose—on the theory that each man shall bear the punishment of his own sins. It is foolish in me to dwell upon such a thing. But it is a thing that could happen, and—you will hardly believe such weakness in me—it turns me quite sick to think of it.'

'I should hardly believe you if you said it didn't make you feel so.'

'Yet, what a wrong it is,' she said, in a tone of concentrated bitterness. 'My whole life is spoiled, as well as theirs; and I used to love my life. I could love it again. I am young yet—too young to be able to give everything up without a groan. But it is weakness in me, all the same, even to mention such a thing; and I hate weakness. No—I suppose the reason I keep at it is, first, because I said I would do so in the beginning, and next—the children.'

'Yes, because you love them too well—and him, too—to let them go. Because you know that if you cut yourself loose from them you would not be able to live your own life again. That would hurt you more than the life you are leading now.'

'Oh, no!' she said, with a slight shake of her shoulders. 'I am sure it is not that. How should I have any love for people who have behaved so abominably, and made such a mess of their own lives, and of mine? It would be most unreasonable—and I am so very reasonable. No! I hate to see children or helpless things ill-treated or wronged. He could do so very wrong to them. I think that is it. I've argued it out often, and the shufflings and shiftings seem to me the smaller evils of the two. . . . . Now, tell me, how did you manage to keep her in hand till it was time to go to the train?'

'It does not matter how I managed,' said Godfrey, coolly, and looking her full in the face. 'Your orders to me were to manage it, and I did manage it. But she is very much exasperated, and I should suggest that if you feel all idea of a reconciliation hopeless you should keep your eye on her movements. She uttered something like a threat; but she went away at last in a little bit better mood, and told me I might go and call upon her if I went to Kirkfence.'

Alizon stared before her with a black look upon her face. At last she said:

'I know as well as if you had told me. She can't help it.

She means nothing bad by it. It is her nature. I believe that if at any time she were to succeed in getting this interview with her husband that she is so anxious for, and if by some chance they were not at daggers drawn, in five minutes she would have forgotten every solid consideration, and would be trying to make him pay her compliments—trying to get up a flirtation with him.'

Godfrey smiled slightly. He was of very much the same opinion himself.

A little silence ensued before Peregrine came into the room. It was characteristic of them both that neither Alizon nor Godfrey made any allusion to the unpleasantness or the importance of secrecy in the matter of the family discord in which Godfrey had so suddenly found himself involved. She did not enjoin silence, and he did not promise it. It was quite unnecessary to do so, for it understood itself to both of them that silence would be preserved by them in the matter.

Before they had again spoken they were interrupted by the entrance of the cause of all the trouble, looking pallid and delicate, but, as it seemed to Godfrey, very attractive, with his tall graceful figure and the most winning smile he knew how to put on, and that was saying a good deal. As Peregrine came forward to meet and greet him there came across his mind, with a great wonder, the recollection that all Nelly's complaints and lamentations had borne reference to the loss of her position, the slights to which she had been subjected, the obscurity in which she had to live, not in the least to the loss of her husband's love.

'She never could have loved him,' said Godfrey to himself. 'I'm certain a woman who had really loved him could have done something with him in spite of his faults. She does not suffer with the worst, or anything near the worst, kind of suffering.'

His hand was within that of Peregrine as this passed through his mind, and the voice of Peregrine was saying to him:

'Why didn't you come yesterday? Do you mean to tell me there's so much business going on, up at that cold-water shop, just now, that you couldn't get away?'

'There was business enough on my hands yesterday to prevent me from joining you, much to my own regret,' said Godfrey.

Peregrine threw himself into a great easy-chair, and said:

'I wouldn't be such a slave for anything.'

Then Godfrey found himself taking his hostess into the dining-room—that delightful old dining-room—with its wonderful black yew chairs and table, its huge old oaken sideboard and mantelpiece and panelling, and, in bright contrast with these, its modern set-out on the table—satiny damask, sparkling glass and silver, and delicate flowers and ferns. It was very pleasant. Apart from all considerations of friendship and comradeship, it was vastly more agreeable to be sitting at this dainty board, swiftly and skilfully waited upon by dexterous and willing hands (for Baker had taken Godfrey to his bosom, so to speak, believing greatly in Miss Alizon's judgment, and much impressed with the visible good effect the new doctor's ministrations had already worked upon his master, and the man was an affectionate as well as an ancient retainer)—much pleasanter was this than to be drearily placed at the head of the Moorside *table d'hôte*, feeling too dissatisfied with the way in which things in general were conducted there to have much zest for the meal.

Peregrine was talkative and gracious. He seemed in an expansive and genial humour, and began to complain of the want of society in and around Askley Bridge.

'It's deadly, you know,' he told Godfrey; 'one stupid dinner-party after another—there's no one to talk to, and hardly a decently good-looking girl in the neighbourhood.' He spoke with the utmost nonchalance, whether from pure forgetfulness or pure cynicism Godfrey could not have told. Alizon sat silent, crumbling bread upon the table. 'The few who approach nearest to being good-looking have no sense,' he added. 'I don't set up to be clever—in fact, I'm the reverse—but I'll be hanged if I can ever find anything to say to these girls. They seem as if they couldn't understand that a fellow who is tied by the leg as I am doesn't want to hear about hunting and shooting and all sorts of things that he used to be able to do and now can't.'

'I suppose it is quiet enough,' said Godfrey, in order to say something.

He guessed, and had heard, too, in a vague way, that whether the Blundells had many friends or not they kept very quiet now. He could understand how, from Alizon's and Nelly's points of view at any rate, it was scarcely seemly to fill with gaiety and visitors a house in which the domestic circumstances were so out of order as in this. Perhaps Peregrine knew it too. He was no fool, but just now, at any rate, he chose to ignore it, and, while he went on inveighing against the 'deadliness' of the society, Godfrey could not but think of those two children

for whose sakes Alizon said she was making her sacrifices. The more he thought the more certain he was of what he had said to her before dinner: that it was for love of them and their father that she did it—for love of the handsome, perverse, sinning, and winning kind of scapegrace, and yet not all scapegrace, who sat at the foot of the table. He was certain that, however she might try to deceive herself in the matter, no other motive power could carry her through such a life.

When she rose:

'Are you coming to me, or are you going upstairs?' she asked.

'Oh, one must have a weed,' he said, lightly and smilingly. 'And, you know, you don't allow that in your gilded saloon. So I should say you had best come to us.'

'I am sure I have no wish to smoke,' began Godfrey, of course.

'Oh, my dear fellow, you don't know what you are saying. She doesn't object. Only she says it would be a scandal to have a smell of tobacco in the drawing-room when some of these people call that we have been praising so. But still, we'll do exactly as you like, Alizon. Which shall it be?'

'Oh, go to your divan!' she said, gruffly. 'I'll most likely come to you by-and-by. I have something else to do just at present.'

Later in the evening, when he and Peregrine were sitting with the chess-board between them in Peregrine's own room, the door was opened, and she came in with a book in her hand. Peregrine did not look up. Godfrey did, and looked at her with a full, calm, open glance, which hers met. It was not exactly a smile with which she replied to his look—it was a more gracious thing (to him) than any smile could have been. Without speaking she went round to an easy-chair on the other side of the fireplace, lighted a large reading candle which stood on a little table beside the chair, and subsided softly into it. She opened her book and was soon, to all appearance, lost and absorbed in it. The evening passed swiftly and silently. To Godfrey it was as happy an evening as he had ever spent. That Peregrine asked him to play chess with him—that Alizon came with her book and sat with them, though uttering never a word, made it so much the more homelike and delightful. When he went away, towards twelve o'clock, and as he wound his way through the tunnel towards the Moorside road, he said to himself, with a deep, long-drawn sigh:

'I am glad I came here. I shall always be glad, whatever happens.'

CHAPTER XXIV.

ABOUT SAINTS AND OTHERS.

ONE afternoon, in May, Godfrey was out walking with Harold Ashby, Mrs. Van Bibber's brother. He had seen a good deal of the young Marylander, and the more he knew him the better he liked him. They used to set off on walks or excursions of many miles' length, and penetrated into some of the quietest, least known solitudes of the moorland country around. It was a great boon to Godfrey to have this sane and agreeable companion, and he had frequently mentioned him in his letters home. Ashby, on his part, seemed equally pleased with Godfrey's society, and they talked over many things together.

On this particular afternoon when they were on the top of a high, wild moor, some three or four miles from the village, and quite isolated from any shelter save what might have been given by some upstanding crag or boulder, the air, which had been close all day, grew suddenly thunderously oppressive. A hot wind blew in their faces; a mass of sullen-looking clouds was advancing to meet them, from the very quarter into which they were proceeding. It was evident that a heavy storm was brewing, and so great was the heat and sultriness that even the imminent prospect of a drenching could not hasten their lagging walk.

'Phew!' exclaimed Harold Ashby, removing his hat and wiping his forehead, 'we have thunderstorms in Maryland, but I never remember anything as bad to breathe in as this, even in Baltimore, and it can be the hottest city in America.'

'It's certainly awful,' Godfrey agreed with him, 'but then, it's very unusual, too;' and carrying their hats in their hands—for the sun was obscured—they toiled limply onward.

They suddenly heard the rush of wheels just behind them, and they moved to one side, on to the heather, to let the thing pass. It did pass, but did not go many paces further. It was a dog-cart, with a servant driving, and a man seated beside him, whose face flashed upon their eyes, as theirs had no doubt flashed upon his. In a second or two more the horse was pulled up, and Peregrine turned and called to them:

'Good-day, doctor! Get up, and your friend, too, if you will put up with the back seat, for there's no time to spare. I can put you down at Moorside gates in less than half an hour.'

'Too good an offer to refuse,' said Godfrey, springing up. 'Come, Ashby.'

Harold followed, and, as the cart began to move on again, Godfrey introduced him to Peregrine.

'Mr. Ashby, from Baltimore, in America. He is staying at Moorside.' (With a smile.)

Peregrine nodded in a friendly manner. So far, it had never happened to Godfrey to receive an unfriendly look from Peregrine, but he knew, spite of all his kindly feeling towards the master of Great Undermoor, that he could be unkind, unjust, and capricious; nay, that it was his nature to be so, along with other things. This afternoon, however, Peregrine was in an amiable mood enough. He looked at young Ashby, and seemed to like what he saw, and asked him if he were making a long stay at Moorside. Harold explained the circumstances of his visit there, and added, laughing:

'It all depends upon my sister, Mrs. Van Bibber, whether I leave next week or make it my head-quarters for the whole summer. I'm under her orders.'

'Oh! Is that the way with American brothers in general?' asked Peregrine, with some interest.

'Oh, no. Only with some,' said Ashby, laughing again. 'And she is very kind about it. She lets me off for weeks at a time, sometimes, and I wander around, and get to know a good deal about this old country in that way.'

'I wish you would dispense with formality, and look in upon me now and then, with the doctor here,' said Peregrine, with urbanity, which gave Godfrey much secret astonishment. 'I'm such an invalid that I see very few people, and it would be a real charity.'

Harold looked pleased. Without being in the least disloyal to his own native land, which he honestly believed to be the finest country on the face of the earth, he was vastly attracted by life in the old country, and was fully aware that no amount of dollars could have secured him the *entrée* thus spontaneously offered. Godfrey was glad, too. It would be good for Peregrine, and he was sure Alizon would not object. So, in high good-humour and satisfaction, they drove swiftly along, down the long hill, along the great high-road, then up a hill again, towards the gates of Moorside, each fully contented with the immediately present aspect of things. In the meantime the black clouds were rolling sullenly and reluctantly up, gradually encroaching upon space after space of blue, which seemed to retire before them in affright, and, as the dog-cart came to a

momentary stop at the gates of the establishment, the first slow, heavy drops began to fall. In ten minutes it was almost dark: the water was coming down in what looked more like columns than drops. The storm was both violent and prolonged. All evening the thunder muttered and growled amongst the hills and waste places, and filled the air with those sounds that—

> 'Come a-swooning over hollow ground,
> And wither drearily on barren moors;'

and, instead of clearing, the sky remained overcast, and the clouds poured on in a steady, ceaseless weeping.

The three men, on that occasion, had been scarce half an hour in each other's company. But they had met, and henceforth and for evermore it could never be as if they had not met.

Things in general thus proceeded tranquilly for some time. Harold was introduced to Undermoor, and apparently proved a success, for he was invited to go again, and that frequently. The two new friends kept Peregrine wonderfully well occupied. His sister and Giles Barras saw the situation and acquiesced; he with a feeling of thankfulness that her toils were lightened, she with a shrug of the shoulders, a narrowing of the eyes, and a sceptical sticking forward of her chin, but without a word. It was only that her whole attitude suggested the remark: 'All very well, but for how long, I pray you?'

Mrs. Van Bibber, when she found that her brother had something more to interest and amuse him, said she could now resolve, with an easy conscience, to stay on indefinitely at Moorside. Her sworn foe, Mrs. Capstick, with a malicious titter, expressed her opinion as having always been that the brother was far more of a gentleman than the sister was of a lady; 'and then,' she went on, inconsistent but malignant, 'it's different with men. Men can always pick up with any stray people, and no one thinks much of it. The sister will never gain any footing there.'

'The sister' was far too rational, and also too genuinely fond of her brother, to have any feelings of personal disappointment in the matter. If Harold liked these people, and they liked him, very good. She was 'real glad,' and it was 'just lovely' for him to get a glimpse of genuine English country-house life—he, being a Marylander, would be well able to appreciate it.

During these visits, which he and Harold Ashby paid at

Great Undermoor, Godfrey sometimes saw a good deal more of Alizon than when he had gone there alone; sometimes a good deal less. That is, sometimes she came and sat with them, and then, somehow, he usually found himself at her side, and they talked together, while Peregrine and Harold had a good deal to say to each other. Or, if they were, as happened sometimes, in the billiard-room, Godfrey was exceedingly glad to let Ashby take the lion's share of the game, for Alizon joined them there, too, occasionally.

At other times, on the contrary, she absented herself altogether, and unless they were present at a meal he did not see her at all; caught no glimpse of her; not a flash of her face, nor the least fluttering fold of her dress. He did not know where she was, nor what she was doing. The evenings now were long and fine, though sometimes cold. Peregrine was apt to be very shivery then, and preferred his own den or the warm billiard-room. Alizon was as likely as not to be out of doors. Many a time Godfrey had the feeling that she was pacing about the gardens or in the woods, somewhere, perhaps with her own thoughts, alone. In spirit he was never far away from her, watching, waiting, or keeping her company, while in outward seeming he was here, talking to Peregrine or Harold, or watching their game. He did not know, even now, what her thoughts were, or her wishes, or tastes, beyond what Giles Barras and Peregrine had said about her having formerly been much in society, and fond of it. From herself he knew nothing. She never, like Peregrine, abused the dulness of the neighbourhood, or said it was impossible to live in it. Always, when she came to sit with them, she had a book in her hand—sometimes a novel, sometimes something else; and she seemed to read the book in spite of the talk that went on around her.

One evening they were in the billiard-room. Peregrine and Harold were playing, and Godfrey had been watching them. Alizon had come in when a game was half-played, and had gone round to one side of the fireplace, where she had a lamp and an easy-chair. Godfrey, looking at her suddenly, had found her eyes fixed upon his face, and her book, for a wonder, drooping from her hand. He went up to her, and, standing by the mantelpiece, asked:

'Do you wish to read, or may I speak to you?'

'Speak on!' said she. 'I should like to hear a voice which is not the voice I have been listening to all day?'

'An unpleasant voice?' he asked.

'Yes—a perpetual question; to which no answer—no definite satisfying answer—ever comes.'

'I am sorry. They have been talking about the ball at Highley,'—a place near where a county ball had lately been held.

'Oh, the ball!' said Alizon, indifferently.

'You were not there.'

'No. You know I was not there. Why should I be there? I'm not madly fond of dancing, for it's own sake—at least, I have passed the age for that. It's for girls, and I'm not in the market—matrimonial, I mean. And I have neither nieces nor *protégées* who are in that market, or who wish to dance; so why should I go, all the incentives to ball-going being absent in my lamentable condition?'

'Don't you like such amusements?' he asked her, point-blank.

She looked half-bored, half-amused, as she answered:

'Oh, if my lines had happened to be cast amongst gaieties and gay people, I should have been like all the rest of them, I suppose. What's the use of talking about it? My lines are cast—here;' and she glanced round the room, and her eyes rested for a moment on Peregrine's figure.

'So, instead, you have become very studious. May I ask what you are reading now?'

She handed him the volume which lay upon her knee, but did not speak.

'*Life of Mother Margaret Mary Hallahan!*' he could not help ejaculating.

'Yes, why not? Have you ever read it?'

'I'm ashamed to say I never even heard of her before. Who was she?'

'A pious woman of low birth; one of the "powerful uneducated persons" whom a certain poet advises us to study and go with,' said Alizon, who occasionally, but very rarely, came out from her usual brief and almost unwilling remarks or replies, and held forth at some length when the question was one that went to her heart. 'She had in some respects a master mind,' she proceeded, 'and she rose from a humble station to a position of great power and importance. She had a ruler's spirit in a woman's body. Yet she was disfigured by the most outrageous, grovelling superstition, and by the basest distrust of the very God to whose service she considered she was devoting herself. She suffered horribly, so this book says, from inexplicable illnesses and torturing pains, which, of course, served to show how

her spirit could override such trifling considerations. With all her gifts and powers, she was hopelessly hysterical.'

'What makes you take to such literature? Do you enjoy it?'

'Yes, immensely. It interests, amuses, and excites me. I like reading about these saints, who forsook all and followed only the desire of their own hearts, and the path of glory which is never found by those who simply go on doing their ugly, grey, everyday duties, who plough the furrows and cart away the stones in the heat of the sun. Not for us such interesting things as ecstasies, stigmata, awful and indescribable illnesses of the body, which only make the face more lovely and the spirit more strong—seem sent expressly for that purpose. I'm afraid, when I am ill, I'm ill all over, and very cross with it, too. But I seldom can put forth even a toothache as a claim to pity.'

Godfrey smiled.

'What are you smiling at?' she asked, abruptly.

'I haven't read Mother Hallahan's life, but I have read some others of the same kind. Don't you think the secret of the great power and influence they exercised, in spite of all the humbug and all the hysteria, was the love they all felt for other beings? That was their talisman, whether they knew it themselves or not. It makes such a difference, in what spirit you do a thing.'

Alizon looked as if possessed of a spirit of anything but love. She would not show whether his words had in any way gone home or not. She would not answer his question at all, but went on:

'It is all unnatural. I don't believe in that universal love which neglects the nearest. And I don't believe in the trials. Trials that we choose for ourselves are always pleasures in reality. It's those which come stalking up to us, knocking at the door, and saying, "Here I am; I've come to stay," which form the test. You very generally find that these miracles of saintliness have at one time or another perpetrated some fearful sin against the first ties of nature; left their families, who wanted them, or something like that—have walked away, in fact, from the duties which were calling aloud to them, to go seeking others of their own selection. If you want mortification, which should you say would hurt the most—to have to give up all you liked and efface your own life, while outwardly seeming just the same, and to go on with this, daily and yearly, or to jump out of bed in the middle of a cold night, fling yourself upon a

stone floor and pray for an hour or two, and to mix ashes with your food, and eat cinders and other disgusting things, in defiance of the fact that the Lord, to whose service you profess to be devoted, did *not* make your digestive apparatus like that of a barn-door fowl, and that you are deliberately doing your best to ruin the health that He gave you?'

'Did Mother Hallahan do that?'

'Not exactly that. Some one else did that, exactly that. But Mother Hallahan did as bad—and died a saint.'

'I guess it was not because of that that she died a saint,' he persisted; 'but because of the love that was in her, and which she kindled in others. I would venture to say as much as that, without reading the book.'

'It's a crotchet of yours,' said Alizon, almost crossly. 'A sentimental crotchet. And you are so free from crotchets, as a rule.'

She frowned, to keep back a smile. Godfrey did not attempt to keep back his smile. But he pondered the matter afterwards. She would talk to him in this way, and he told himself he must be satisfied with it, and, indeed, he had not the least intention of betraying to her that he was less than satisfied with it. But, for all that, he hungered and thirsted sometimes, in an unreasonable manner, to know what she really did think about him—whether she looked upon him as a friend, a machine, or a useful chattel to help her in her difficulties with Peregrine. She was welcome to do both the last, so far as he was concerned, but he had an intense longing to know that he had some place in her consciousness as her first, true friend. She would never tell him, he felt sure of that. He would have to find it out for himself, and if by any chance he let her see that he was trying to find it out, what a cool, self-possessed, provoking pleasure she would take in making the truth more obscure and difficult to trace.

Since Nelly's ill-timed visit she had not mentioned her to him, and he, of course, had maintained silence on the subject. He guessed pretty much the truth about it—namely, that it was an unusual thing for her to come over, but that she had worked herself into a fury since Alizon's last visit to her, in which she had been told that Miss Smith was not to go, and Miss Mason was not to come to her. She had been fired by the passionate desire to assert herself, to hurt or annoy those who were hurting her, and her usual safety-valve, Miss Smith, had not on this occasion been available, as Nelly had visited her displeasure on her by not speaking to her at all. This was a boon to the hard-working governess, as it enabled her to

pursue some of her own occupations undisturbed; but it was very dangerous for Nelly, and it culminated in the expedition, the end of which has been narrated. She had been vanquished and sent back, as she had been on each similar occasion, without having gained her end; having secured only a few hours of intense nervous excitement, a fresh string of injuries to brood over, and—perhaps that counted for something—the instinctive knowledge that she had vexed, alarmed, and agitated her sister-in-law as much as the latter could be agitated and alarmed. She would not go again soon. The hateful episode was over. Godfrey guessed how hateful it had been to Alizon, and was not surprised at her wishing to hold her peace about it.

At this time, too, affairs at Moorside took a turn—sudden, though perhaps not utterly unexpected by some of those connected with the place. There had been rumours, more or less, ever since the departure of Mrs. Ackers, that she and Dr. Burton had become engaged, and speculation was rife as to whether he would, in that event, give up his appointment—'resign on going to the Lords,' as Mrs. Van Bibber flippantly put it. She had asked Godfrey several times in a sarcastic way whether he did not mean to seize so brilliant an opportunity. He merely laughed, and at last told her it might be brilliant, but he expected it would be also too expensive for him.

'Do you mean that the authorities here expect a premium from their medical man for being allowed to experiment upon the visitors?' she cried.

'No. They give him some kind of a salary, I believe. But Burton professed to have a certain amount of private practice. Most likely, if it comes to his leaving, its value will be decided upon by the lady, and not by him.'

'And you?'

'Well, I'm not rich, though I might have enough to buy it; but I think it would hardly be worth my while.'

'I'm very much of your opinion. You had far better come home with Harold and me, when we go, and try your chance in our country.'

He smiled, but said nothing. One day arrived the official announcement of Dr. Burton's engagement to Mrs. Ackers, and his consequent resignation of his post at Moorside. The goodwill and reversion of his private small practice were in the market for the ridiculously low sum of two hundred and fifty pounds, which was assuredly a very low figure; but he did not wish to stand in the way of a would-be successor

who might possibly be struggling and cramped for want of means.

'Two hundred and fifty pounds!' cried Mrs. Van Bibber, when she heard this. 'Two hundred and fifty pence would have been nearer the mark. Dear knows he never earned two hundred and fifty dollars by his private practice.'

Godfrey did not say much. He was quite sure he was not going to pay two hundred and fifty pounds for Dr. Burton's practice. The mere demand of such a sum was a piece of insolent imposture. It remained, however, to be seen what the Moorside board of directors would have to say on the subject the next time they met. His engagement with them was for six months. Circumstances alone could decide whether he should remain longer than the appointed time.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE SUMMONS.

It was about a week later; May was rapidly drawing to a close. That afternoon there was to be a meeting of the Moorside directors. Godfrey knew it; knew, too, that they would probably discuss the question—who was to be appointed the new resident there, and whether the post should be offered to himself. He tried to put it all out of his thoughts, and succeeded pretty well.

He was engaged to dine that evening at Undermoor, and during the afternoon he was out, and, later, in the garden of the establishment. As he sat on a bench in a remote part of the grounds, and vaguely traced patterns on the walk with his stick, he thought, not so much of this possible appointment as of what it would really be best for him to do—to go or to stay. By 'go' he meant leave England—go abroad—push out to the west, or far east, and lead the rough life of a pioneer—the life which is apt also to be a short one. The more he reflected upon it, the more convinced he became that in that course alone was true wisdom for him—to carry out his engagement here, and as soon as that should be over to leave the country; get away from all this, and from her who was now to him the centre and soul of 'all this.' If he had been on a level with her socially, pecuniarily, as he was otherwise, mentally and morally, would he have measured himself with her, and set

himself to overcome that outward-seeming roughness—to penetrate to the heart which he knew was burning within—to show her that there was a man whom she could trust—one who was of equal stature with herself in all inner things? Would he? Would he not? He smiled to himself. How long would it have taken, he wondered, to open her eyes to the fact that there might be a dependence, or at any rate an indissoluble union, better than the proudest self-reliance? How long to have instilled into her mind that which as yet, he felt, she scarce even knew with her understanding?—the great principle which a remarkable man has put for us into simple but remarkable words, which Godfrey knew:

'Aimer Dieu, et se faire aimer de lui, aimer nos semblables et nous faire aimer d'eux,' voilà la morale et la religion; dans l'une et dans l'autre l'amour est tout—fin, principe et moyen.'

She did not know it; he had never met with any one so passionately high-minded, so sternly self-sacrificing as she, who was so utterly ignorant of it. He could have taught it her—how soon? He shrugged his shoulders. As if it mattered! It could have been done under those imaginary circumstances. Under the real ones it could never even be begun.

'Amen!' he muttered to himself. 'It is what you have got to bear, and you can bear it. Be thankful there is no choice of paths; therefore no debate or suspense.'

He got up from the bench and went into the house. He was not bidden to Undermoor till eight, so he went into his room to read until it should be time to dress. As he sat there, and before the first dinner-bell had rung, a tap at his door was followed by the entrance of one of the chambermaids.

'If you please, sir, this letter has come for you by the second post, and Mr. Slater has sent up this telegram too. It came just before lunch, and he can't think why it wasn't given to you then. He's very sorry.'

'Thank you,' said he, and held them both unopened until she had left the room.

The telegram first, of course. It was from Hilda.

'*All over. Shall expect you as soon as possible.*'

Despite the dread that seized his heart, he was able to notice that it had been despatched before half-past eleven that morning. He mechanically looked at his watch. It wanted ten minutes to seven. This was Moorside 'business' all over.

The letter next. That also was from Hilda, written the evening before.

'DEAR GODFREY,—It is nearly eleven o'clock at night, but I feel that I must let you know that mother is very far from well. I know so little about these things that I cannot say whether she is dangerously ill, or whether it is only a trifling thing. What frightens me is that she is so unlike herself. She looked pale last night. I went to see her this morning before going out, and found her very languid and tired. She said she would not get up. That was what made me uneasy. It is so unlike her. I got back as early as I could, and found Letty with her, and she still in bed and complaining of fatigue. She is as quiet and gentle as possible, but seems to have lost all wish to move or rouse herself, and all interest in outside things. We have spoken to her of what is going on, and so forth, and she smiles and says, "Indeed!" and then lies still. It is not that she looks very ill—and she says she has no pain—but there is a peculiar, far-away expression, so unnatural to her, that I am very uneasy. Once, after lying with her eyes shut for a long time, she all at once held out her hand, as if to some one fresh in the room, and said with *such* a smile, "Godfrey, I am here—at *last!*" Letty was just going to say "Godfrey is not here," but I stopped her. I knew she meant my father. Dear Godfrey, it was awful, though so gentle and quiet. I must not say more, as I want to go back to her. You will not get this till to-morrow afternoon. She will not have a doctor, and I am so afraid of vexing her by doing what she dislikes, when she looks so fragile. I don't know what to do. If you can get a day away, please do, and come over here and see her. It would make me so much less anxious. That is almost all she has said of her own accord, and all the time she looks as if she were waiting for some one or something. Of course I shall stay with her to-morrow.—With love, affectionately and anxiously yours,

'HILDA NOBLE.'

Then the telegram again:

'*All over. Shall expect you as soon as possible.*'

Godfrey rose from his seat and drew a long, deep sigh. What was the meaning of it all? He had no time to think of it; no time even to begin to grieve. He went downstairs and entered the office, just as the last bell was ringing and people were going in to dinner. Slater at once began to apologise about the telegram. A mistake—neglect. He hoped it was nothing important.

'Telegrams are generally meant to be delivered at once, if the person is there for whom they are intended,' Godfrey could not help saying. 'It contains the news of my mother's death, and a summons home. The only thing to do now is to find whether I can get there to-night.'

Slater, silenced for once in his loquacious career, consulted a time-table. Godfrey could not get home before eleven or later that night. He could not leave Askley Bridge for another hour. There was enough fully to occupy him for that hour. His first business was to send a note to Alizon, explaining the reason of his not being able to keep his engagement with them; then a short letter of a similar nature to the secretary, in which he promised to be back at his post within a few days. A summons to a neighbouring local medical man, asking him to temporarily undertake his duties, and explaining the reason why, completed his correspondence. Slater, much subdued, undertook to see that each one was safely delivered to the person for whom it was intended, and took his address, so as to be able to forward letters if any came. Then Godfrey packed what he wanted into a travelling-bag, and walked to the station in the cold light of a May evening just after sundown.

It was half-past eleven when he knocked at the door of his mother's house.

There was a light in the passage. It was Letty who opened the door to him, looking doubtfully forth. He spoke her name in a low tone.

'Godfrey! Oh, thank heaven! We could not imagine why you neither came nor sent any message,' she said, also in a low voice, as she let him in and closed the door.

'Where is Hilda?' he asked her softly, as she clasped her hands round his arm and looked at him.

'Here. Come in.'

She led the way into the front sitting-room. The last time he and Hilda had been there together had been after their return from the dinner-party, when they had both sat working into the small hours.

Here he found Hilda, crouched together in a huddled-up attitude, in a large chair near the fireplace. His professional eye, apart from his brotherly feeling, took it all in, and the meaning of it. As he approached her she opened her eyes, and turned towards him her face, ghastly with grief and fatigue.

'I had quite given you up, Godfrey. I thought something had happened,' she said, uncoiling herself and rising.

'Something had,' he replied, going to her and taking her in his arm. She put her head on his shoulder, and began to weep—weep; the tears which had been kept back by excitement and strong nervous tension. 'Something had. They don't know the meaning of business up at that place. I only got your letter and telegram at the same time—nearly seven o'clock. You may believe I lost no time in setting off.'

'Yes. I was sure it was not your fault. Oh, Godfrey! I am such a poor wretch when it comes to bearing burdens. Letty is worth fifty of me.'

'You have had a pretty heavy weight on your shoulders for some time past,' he said, consolingly. 'Tell me about it—unless you'll go to bed at once, and wait till to-morrow morning.'

'No. It is such a comfort to have you here. You understand that she is dead, Godfrey?'

'Yes. When was it?'

'About ten o'clock this morning. We were both with her. And I had to send for a doctor. I dared not take the responsibillty of being without one any longer. But she was unconscious when he came. I told him everything, and he said nothing could have been done. A failure of the vital forces, he called it. She had just come to the end of her power of living, so she died. Oh, mother! oh mother!' she suddenly exclaimed, shuddering and sobbing, and he felt her hands clutch his shoulder with spasmodic strength. 'Of course it had to come some time,' she said between her sobs, 'and I thought I was so strong, and able to stand alone; but I feel as if all my protection was gone. I didn't know how large a place she filled. It is dreadful—dreadful! If I had thought it would be like this I would have told her, and asked her so many things.'

Never had either Godfrey or Letty seen Hilda show any feeling like this. She and her mother had always been good friends. Mrs. Noble had been proud of her, in a way. Hilda had always shown respect and consideration and high esteem for her mother, but 'feeling' had never been much in her line, for all her nervous excitability. This passionate outburst struck Letty dumb. She stood by, her wide eyes fixed upon Godfrey, her colour coming and going, while she drew quick breaths. Godfrey was not so surprised. He knew rather more about his eldest sister's temperament than either she herself or Letty knew. He did not speak; but when her grief was a little less violent, he said:

'Now, Hilda, my orders to you are to go to bed. You are

physically ill. Letty isn't. She can tell me all I want to know. I will see you again in the morning, and we can then decide what is to be done.'

'But won't you come with me and see——' she began, and was again convulsed with sobs.

'Not with you—no. I shall see my mother to-night and say my farewell to her. I have much to think about. It will be morning before I go to bed, if I go at all. Letty, just take her to her room, and come back to me.'

Hilda lifted her face, which already looked less drawn, though more utterly sad. Letty took her hand under her arm, and they went out of the room together. In one moment Godfrey had taken his place. The less brilliant and outwardly effective member of the family had, in the supreme emergency, become, no one could have said how or why, the head of the situation.

Letty soon returned, looking very grave. 'She will go to bed at once. She said I couldn't do anything for her. I can't understand Hilda, Godfrey. She always seemed so strong. To see her managing all those wearisome girls and colleagues and keeping them in order, and facing *that* committee, when there are things she is determined to have from them, you would think she never could break down. But she has been paralysed with this, as if she didn't know which way to turn.'

'No, you don't understand,' he said. 'It isn't likely you should. I think I know why it is. She will be better to-morrow.'

Then they decided how long he would be able to stay, and he added:

'Hilda will be all right, of course. She has her work. She will stay and do it. As for you and me, I think we shall have to fight it out in company, Letty.'

'What do you mean?' she almost whispered.

'I can't explain fully to-night. But you can understand that my mother's income dies with her. We could not take money from the Warburtons any longer, even if they offered it—which they certainly will not.'

'Yes,' Letty nodded. 'Should I go and live with you, do you mean, Godfrey?

'I should think so. But we can decide to-morrow.'

By-and-by, Letty went to bed too, and Godfrey was left alone.

It was past one in the morning when he at last arose from the chair on which he had cast himself, and roused himself from the reverie, or dream, or forecasting in which he had been plunged. Profound stillness was over the home and in the street. A small lamp burned on a little table at one side of

the room. Godfrey took it in his hand and ascended the stairs, paused a moment at his mother's door, and then entered her room.

The chamber was silent, dark, and shrouded, orderly and neat, with that terrible orderliness which no movement of its occupant shall ever more disturb. He closed the door behind him, and placed the lamp upon the little table which always stood at one side of the bed, with her Bible and Prayer-Book upon it, a Thomas à Kempis, a little volume containing a translation of some of Joubert's *Pensées*, and one or two other small things which he had been always accustomed to think of as being as much part of herself as her hands or her eyes. From these books she had extracted the maxims which had guided her life—that is, she had found in them the spiritual aliment suited to her nature. From them she had taught her children from their earliest infancy. Whatever doubts, questions, or disagreement with such things might have found their way into their lives, from these had been derived their first mental and moral nourishment, and Godfrey always considered that the food had served its purpose well.

The light of the lamp fell mild and steady upon the dead face of his mother. Godfrey had not asked his sister, 'Did she leave no message for me?' Had there been any such message, he was sure they would have hastened to deliver it to him. He did not believe she had asked for him or even mentioned him since she had been taken ill. She had been disappointed in him—she had been unjust to him; as saints and heroines can be, and are. Deep down in his heart he knew it. But he did not resent it; he did not admit it. What he said to himself was:

'She was not satisfied with me.'

Long he stood there, perfectly motionless, gazing without removing his eyes, into the severe marble purity of the face, in its absolute, unbroken, and unbreakable calm. The pure and delicate features, which, in a stronger and less exquisite mould, she had bequeathed to both Hilda and himself, were idealised into an indescribable deathly beauty. The marble eyelids were closed over those mild, unrebuking, unapproving eyes, which had never turned to him with any glow of delight since, as a youth, he had taken his own way about his career in life, contrary to her wishes. Now they never could have that glow in them for him, how much soever his conduct in the future might be to her mind. It was too late. They never would see.

What the thoughts might be which followed each other through his soul, during that prolonged and motionless watch, no outsider could possibly say. She had never understood him. Perhaps, whatever might have happened, she never would have understood that the son who had displeased her had in him the stuff of which heroes are made, transmitted to him from her own veins—for in her own way she had been a heroine. Godfrey, who had no notion at all that he was, or was capable of being, a hero, certainly did not reproach her in his heart with this. Probably, if he had allowed any feeling at all of injury to prevail in his mind, it would take the form of a wish that she had been just a little kinder—a little more forgiving to him—would have displayed the slightest wish for him to approach nearer to her, or the least desire to show him any sympathy. Most likely that would be his thought. After a very long time he said, half aloud, as one who had reflected deeply within himself:

'Yes. As you would have thought it right, so it shall be. I promise it.'

He stooped down, touched the cold, calm brow with his lips, took the lamp in his hand, and went downstairs again.

CHAPTER XXVI.

PERSUASION.

MRS. NOBLE was to be buried on the day but one after her death. There was, consequently, one whole day before the sisters and brother, in which to arrange the disposal of their future. One thing lay very much upon Godfrey's mind, which he felt he must do, but he would not do it until he had spoken to his sisters about it. He had had a few hours' sleep, and joined his sisters at breakfast. It was extraordinary, and they all felt it so, that though they had had their own battles to fight, their own livelihoods to gain, and had, therefore, been in a measure completely independent of their mother, who had, moreover, always encouraged self-reliance, yet they felt, one and all, from the young girl Letty up to Godfrey, with his seven-and-twenty years and the deep consciousness that on his shoulders lay the burdens of one who is a man, as if they had been stripped, stranded, and left, in a way, defenceless. It was a sensation which would gradually pass away, but it was

very strongly present just then, and it showed how strong in reality had been the character, and how powerful the influence, of the quiet, shrinking gentlewoman whom they had called mother.

After breakfast he unfolded his plans to them.

'Burton is going to be married, and I expect they will offer me his post. There may be a little difficulty in the way, because he wants some money for his private practice. It is all rubbish, and, if the Moorside place is offered to me, I shall take it. It will be clearly the right thing to do. I think the best thing I can do will be to become a householder as speedily as possible, and have Letty with me to keep house for me, because she clearly can't live at Moorside—eh, Letty?'

'Godfrey!'

She restrained herself by a mighty effort. But for the solemnity of their present circumstances, she must have danced round the room for joy.

'But,' said Hilda, 'it seems to me the most natural thing for Letty and me to remain together. Her education, you know——'

'Do you think you'll ever make Letty into a second edition of yourself, Hilda?' he asked her, smiling.

'I haven't the brains, you know,' said Letty, with suppressed eagerness, and looking as though, could she have had them gratis, nothing would have induced her to accept the gift.

'But,' said Hilda, 'if she doesn't persevere and fight it out, what will become of her? And she has got so far——'

'I will undertake for her,' said Godfrey. 'And I'll see to her education, too. Don't be alarmed. It will be one care the less on your shoulders, which have burdens enough already. Trust me.'

'Oh, Hilda, do!' breathed Letty.

Hilda's lips were opened to speak. Suddenly as she looked at them, and saw Letty's face blazing with excitement and fresh young beauty, and met Godfrey's eyes with their look of slight amusement mingled with seriousness, she recalled Dr. Stonex's words about him, and became silent, saying after a pause:

'You are generally right, Godfrey. You and Letty will be very happy together, I am sure. Let it be so, then.'

Then was Letty, her heart's desire being granted, seized with sudden compunction and fear lest she had seemed unkindly eager to leave Hilda,

'Hilda, don't think I would not like to stay with you,' she began.

'No, child, I never thought so. But Godfrey has something else to say.'

'Yes, I must go and see Mr. Warburton, and tell him what has happened.'

'Of course,' said Hilda, 'and thank him for his goodness in the past. He will not have the tax any longer.'

'No, but there's another thing, which it seems to me is the only thing to do, and that is to say to him that we consider that money—that thousand pounds, you know—for which he pretended to pay interest to my mother, cannot be touched by us. Letty was three years old when my father died. She's nearly eighteen now; that makes fourteen years. For fourteen years my mother has received two hundred a-year from Mr. Warburton—in other words, they pensioned her, though she tried not to think so. To set against that, they have had the use of a wretched ten hundred pounds of ours. We have had principal and interest twice over, and——'

'Yes,' said Hilda, 'you are right, Godfrey. The offer must be made, whether they accept it or not.'

'And do you think it will be accepted?' asked Letty, joining in the discussion for the first time.

'Probably,' said Godfrey.

'I suppose it is all right—the least we could do—but I don't believe that after all these years he will accept it. It would not be consistent with his other conduct,' said Letty.

The others both smiled.

'You'll find inconsistency a very common thing in the affairs of men,' her brother told her. 'The money is his by right, and I am sure that, as a man of business, he will see the sense of keeping it.'

Letty sighed.

'You may be right, but how delightful it would be if this time he were consistent!'

Godfrey went out, and the girls were left alone. While he was away, a later post brought him a letter with the Askley Bridge post-mark. The day wore slowly and sadly on, and late in the afternoon he returned.

'Well,' they both asked him, 'did you see him?'

'Yes, I saw him. He was very kind, said how glad he had always been to help my mother, and he is coming to-morrow.'

'And the money?' asked Letty, whose curiosity on this point was not to be controlled.

'Oh—the money,' said Godfrey. 'Well, Letty, you were

actually right. He said no, he would not have it. We were to keep it and start clear. He gave me a cheque for it, and said he hoped often to hear of us, but that the accounts between us were closed.'

'I knew he would,' said Letty, triumphantly. 'His head and his heart alike are in the right place.'

In fact it was a great relief to them all three—the proof of Mr. Warburton's 'consistency,' as Letty called it—quite as much as the possession of the cash.

The letter which had come for Godfrey, and which he now proceeded to read, was a friendly one from Giles Barras, telling him he had heard from the Blundells of his loss, and offering his sympathy. He added that the post of physician at Moorside was to be offered to Godfrey, and he gave him this information *ex officio*. He hoped he would not be deterred from accepting it on account of the money condition attached to it, as the directors had unanimously come to the conclusion that it was a fraud, and Dr. Burton was to be requested to produce his books and show that he had anything to sell worth the price he had put upon it. Meantime Moorside could not be left without a physician, and they all hoped Godfrey would fill the post. This was highly consoling to the young man, who felt that even if he had to put aside his dreams of independence and a career abroad, there would be many compensations gained by his staying in England.

The sad and silent evening came and went. They all felt that what ties soever of love and duty, ties of spiritual strength still knit them together, the outward visible bond was gone. By this time to-morrow not even the solemn presence of the dead would be there, as a focus for their thoughts and words. It was the breaking up of a household.

The morrow, this sad dividing day of their lives, passed quickly by. The three children and the man who had befriended them followed the dead mother, and laid her in her grave, and came away again. Their arrangements were quickly made. Hilda and Letty would remain at the house till Godfrey had found some kind of an abode to take Letty to; then Hilda would go to her rooms at the school, and so their new life would begin.

That afternoon he said a temporary farewell to his sisters, and about nine o'clock in the evening arrived at Moorside. On the table in his consulting-room he found a note from Alizon Blundell, asking him to call as early as he could at Undermoor on the following morning.

He was not kept waiting many minutes after his arrival at the great house. Alizon came into the room with a grave, gentle expression in her eyes, for which he could have worshipped her. It was these sudden flashes, revealing a wealth of feeling behind her provoking behaviour, which bound him (and had bound many another before him) fast in her fetters.

'It is kind of you to come so promptly, after your great trouble, and in the midst of all your business,' she said, taking his hand in hers, with a frank and simple gesture of sympathy and fellow-feeling. 'We had no right to ask it of you, except that of friendship, which we hope you feel for us, but Mr. Barras told us they were going to ask you to stay at Moorside, and so, in the most shameless manner, we resolved that you should talk it over with us before you sent a refusal to those fond creatures. Peregrine is anxious to speak to you.'

'Indeed!' he stammered, and could say no more.

It was intoxicating, because of what he felt for her; but was it not perhaps a little too sisterly on her part to have much value of the kind he craved for? Be that as it might, she went on:

'You are surprised, of course. You are going to have it explained. I am now going to take you direct to Peregrine. As soon as he heard this offer was to be made to you, he had a plan of his own to propose. He will propound it almost the instant you see him. I wish you to understand that it is his scheme, his own idea, entirely. You men have such strange notions that I feel certain, if I had not prepared you, you would have thought I had put him up to it, or some nonsense of that kind. Most emphatically I did not, so you need not snub his well-meant efforts under the false impression that they did not originate with him—do you see?'

'I hear. I can't say that I see exactly. But you say I shall see, so I suppose I shall.'

Alizon laughed.

'It shows how advanced civilisation has enabled us thoroughly to distrust one another when this kind of thing has to be explained. Now let us go to him.'

Godfrey followed her to Peregrine's sitting-room, wondering what was coming next.

'Well, doctor, I'm glad to see you,' said the young man. 'My sister told me all about your trouble. I'm awfully sorry. Did you get back last night?'

Already some of the frost was melting from Godfrey's spirit under the benign influence of this friendly greeting. He took

a chair near to Peregrine's couch, answered his questions and asked him how he did.

'Oh, I'm taking out a new lease of life—thanks to you. We hear you are going to be asked to stay at Moorside—and that will be such a good thing for us. We will never call it "the cold-water shop," or speak disrespectfully of it again, if you will stay.'

'Speak for yourself,' said Alizon, who was standing in the window, which was a little open, and was cautiously making advances to a robin, whom by dint of long and patient service she had rendered almost tame.

'But you are going to stay, are you not?' said Peregrine. 'You are never going to frustrate my plan?'

'I don't know what your plan may be,' said Godfrey, 'but I am certainly going to stay here for the present—on an extended scale, as one might say. I suppose they will allow me to take a house and go and live in it. I must do so, for my youngest sister is coming to be with me, and she certainly cannot live at Moorside.'

'Ah!' exclaimed Peregrine, 'I must have been inspired when I thought of it. We hoped you would leave that place and come somewhere where you could be your own master. And, what is more, I am officious enough to think that I know of the very house.'

'You!' ejaculated Godfrey.

'Yes, I. Do you know Little Undermoor?'

'Little Undermoor; why, that is——' Godfrey began, in great surprise.

'Ours—mine, you mean,' said Peregrine, nodding. 'It is. And for that very reason it is that you could have it. Little Undermoor is standing ready furnished, waiting for a tenant. Why should not you be that tenant?'

'Because,' replied Godfrey, decisively, 'it may be Little Undermoor, compared with this, but it is not in reality a small house, and it is altogether beyond my means, or any means that are likely to be mine for years.'

'But it isn't beyond your notions of what is agreeable and comfortable?' Peregrine asked, with an insinuating smile.

Godfrey could have laughed. The young man, when he cared to please, or had an object to gain, could put considerable skill and much perseverance into his method of doing either of these things.

'It isn't always allowable to indulge one's notions of that kind, even when they are within one's reach,' he said.

'But if it were to do me a kindness? If I asked it as a great favour?' said Peregrine, persuasively. 'Remember, it would be a favour in more ways than one. It isn't good for houses to stand empty, and yet we don't care for any one who comes along to have Little Undermoor. Now, look here! I know why you are hesitating. We are friends enough for me to touch on the subject, I hope. I suppose you are too proud, or independent, or whatever the thing may be called, to go and live there and say nothing about rent and taxes, and so forth, which would be what I should like; but to make it right and get what I want—for that is at the bottom of it all, you know—let us agree, in business-like way, that I am your landlord, and that you pay me as much rent as, say, what they ask for such a house as you would have taken in the village. It's easy enough to find out what that would be. I've been thinking about it, and that plan seems to me most ingenious, and quite fair too.'

Godfrey was in the sorest embarrassment. The kindness and the geniality went to his heart. If circumstances had cast his lines in places where he was forced to sacrifice some of his independence, it seemed that many compensations were offered along with the sacrifice. The cage was to be handsomely gilded, and made attractive enough.

He looked at Peregrine, who had evidently put his whole heart into the matter. Godfrey wilfully suppressed the conviction that to-morrow, perhaps, his whole heart might be out of it, as was so often the case with him.

'It is awfully good of you,' he said. 'It is worth anything to me to find that you have made so much of a friend of me. But I don't think I ought to take your offer.'

'Why not, pray?'

'There is something incongruous between that house and my real position.'

At the same moment he seemed to see Letty's face, when or if she should hear that Little Undermoor, a country house with a garden, an orchard, and many other delightful things pertaining to it, was to be her future abode. She would be almost out of her senses with delight.

'There are no logical reasons,' Godfrey went on. 'Perhaps I ought to be ashamed of having the feeling, but I have it.'

'I am sure you ought to be ashamed of having a feeling which, if indulged in, will cause me so much vexation and annoyance. In fact, I am sure it will make me ill again if you don't do as I wish,' said Peregrine, in a determined tone.

'I have set my mind upon it, and she—for a wonder—completely approves.' He nodded his head towards Alizon, who just turned towards them, and observed:

'Oh, yes; I think it is about the most sensible thing he has done for a long time;' then turned her attention once more to the robin who, alarmed at the unexpected movement and voice, had flown off to the twig of a tree near the window, from which he was looking at her rather distrustfully.

'You can't think how much I shall be disappointed if you don't gratify me in this,' Peregrine repeated, as Godfrey did not immediately speak. 'And though I have "a great deal to be thankful for," as pious people say, yet the things I long for I don't often get; and I am sure you must know the difference there is between the two.'

'Yes, you might take that into consideration,' said Alizon, giving up her flirtation with the robin, and coming towards them. 'There's a great deal in that, you cannot deny;' and she looked at Godfrey.

He hardly knew what sudden impulse it was that seized him. He said, looking first at one and then at the other of them:

'I must speak out. We are on unequal terms in many respects, but you have so treated me that I have never felt that. Friendship should do away with other considerations—obligations and all that sort of thing. There can be no debts where there is friendship. And I could take this that you offer me, and not feel in the least what they call "under obligations" to you. I should never feel them, unless you were to change. Suppose you were to change and cease to be my friend. I don't mean Miss Blundell, I mean you;' and he looked fixedly at Peregrine.

The latter coloured. There was a momentary silence, during which Godfrey had time to realise that Peregrine might take in ill part his plain-spoken words, and to feel, with the almost supernatural acuteness of instinct belonging to love, that Alizon feared an outbreak. Then Peregrine said, as the colour mounted to his face:

'Then you don't trust me. . . . . Well, perhaps I have not deserved that people should always trust me.'

There was another momentary silence. Then Godfrey Noble, with much inward emotion, suddenly cast away all his prudence and foresight, which seemed ignoble things in the presence of friendship like this, and said, in a deeper voice than was usual to him:

'You shall not be able to say that to me. You have given me every cause to trust you. I will do what you wish. It is what I wish, too, only——'

'But me no buts,' said Peregrine, decisively. 'That is settled. For once I have had my own way.'

These little sayings of Peregrine's, as to having or not having his own way, always affected Godfrey with a peculiar sensation; not of anger, exactly, nor yet of shock, but of something more like foreboding. They revealed something in his character that was either a want of self-knowledge or a conviction that to get what he wanted was about the chief thing in life to be desired, which had something ominous in it. But, filled as he was with the pleasure, the soothing, and the consolation of this double friendship, this warm regard on the part of both brother and sister, warmed also with the glow that comes of having given up one's own suspicious common sense at the behest of a fascinating friend, Godfrey did not now dwell upon the little incident.

Peregrine, who was as pleased as a child with a new toy, next remarked:

'This very afternoon we will go and look over the place. Not that it is in any want of repair, but for you to see it. You'll want to tell your sister about things. I'll tell you what —stay and have lunch with us and we'll go to Little Undermoor as soon as we have finished.'

Godfrey was obliged to refuse this invitation. He had been absent from his post for several days. He must return to it as soon as possible, and stay there.

Despite Peregrine's grumbling, it was decided that they should not go to look at Little Undermoor till the following afternoon.

'Dr. Noble is quite right, Peregrine. He is, indeed. He must do his work, you know. You, who have no work, are apt to forget that.'

'His work be hanged! It will rain to-morrow, and everything will be spoiled,' said Peregrine, with extreme annoyance.

He could not, however, move the other two from their resolution; so, grumbling and scolding them, he was forced to give in.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A NOTE OF WARNING.

It was a week later. Despite Peregrine's croakings it had not rained on the day they took for exploring Little Undermoor. They had gone over the house, which was more than half-furnished, in a solid, old-fashioned style. Godfrey thought that a few of their own things might be imported into it. Hilda would take some others, and the superfluous ones could be sold. In answer to some question of Alizon's, he said:

'I shall be obliged to have Hilda's advice. I shall get her to come over next Saturday. She can come and return on the same day, after all, and have Sunday on which to rest. I will write to her. I thought of it last night.'

'A man ought to consult his women-kind about all such things,' said Alizon, approvingly; and later, when they were all together, having tea in the library at Great Undermoor, she said:

'I have been thinking of what you said, and it seems to me ridiculous that your sister should have so much fatigue and bother as all that. I have a better plan. I should be charmed if she would just come here on Saturday morning, go over the house in the afternoon, and stay all night with us. And if she must go back on Sunday, there is one good train in the day from Kirkfence to your place. How will that do?'

He flushed red with pleasure.

'How good of you to think of such a thing. It had occurred to me that she might stay all night at Moorside, and then I thought——'

'That it would be detestable for her,' said Alizon, curtly. 'Of course it would. Give me her address, and I'll write to her. I am supposing she is aware of my existence,' she added, looking at him through her half-closed eyes.

'Assuredly she is,' he replied, half laughing. 'You are overwhelming me with kindness, but this is the greatest of all.'

'It happens to be a great kindness to myself,' said Alizon. 'I may tell you that I have wanted to see your sister ever since you told me about her that night at the Manor. I always want to see, and learn something too, from a woman who has had a battle to fight, and who has fought it and held her own. But you can write to her also and prepare her to expect rustics—clodhoppers. We are wretchedly coarse and

rural, you know, and have nothing intellectual about us. Tell her all that.'

'You are pleased to amuse yourself,' he said, though he was not quite sure that she was amusing herself.

'Am I? Well, we shall see. The address—as I said before.'

He gave it to her. Alizon, who was a prompt person, at once wrote to Hilda. Her invitation was very naturally accepted, as a piece of real consideration. Godfrey had a note from his sister saying:

'What did you mean by your description of Miss Blundell? I don't remember your words, but I gathered that she was abrupt to incivility. She does not write like that at any rate.'

He smiled, not at all surprised.

One morning, just before Hilda was to come, Godfrey was sitting with the brother and sister, when Peregrine said:

'Alizon, what are you going to do to amuse Miss Noble when she comes? Surely you'll try to find her some company a little more exciting than our two selves.'

'You seem to forget that Miss Noble has only just lost her mother, and will scarcely wish to see a good deal of company while she is here,' retorted Alizon, much more sharply than Godfrey had ever heard her speak to Peregrine. Her brother bit his lip, and his face flushed slightly.

'*Bête!*' he muttered. 'What an ass I am! Pray excuse me, Noble! One gets so frightfully rusty, living in these wilds, with no society; one forgets.'

He looked at his sister as he spoke, and his expression was, as Godfrey could not conceal from himself, almost a bad one. She took no notice of him. Godfrey murmured a polite, 'Don't mention it,' and it was over, leaving in his mind a sense of jar and discord.

He did not see Hilda until after lunch on the day of her arrival. He had been unable to leave Moorside until the afternoon, and, on inquiring at Great Undermoor, was told that the two ladies had gone to the little house, and would expect him there. He repaired thither, rather glad that the two young women had made acquaintance unmolested by him. He very soon found himself in sight of them and of the house.

Little Undermoor was a two-storied building, long and rather low, with no architectural pretensions whatsoever, but having a pleasant, homelike look. There was a gravelled drive and a round sweep of the same in front, just large enough for a carriage to turn in. Then a grassy bank sloped upwards, shutting out the road, and indeed all other view. Tall, white

rosebushes, and some borders with other summer flowers in them, completed the garden, which, in its utter absence of pretentiousness, gave a pleasant impression. Behind, there was a good deal more ground, and an orchard containing apple-trees, plums, and pears; also a kitchen garden, and all other appointments belonging to a small but complete country house. Small, perhaps, for people like the Blundells, who had preferred to keep it in complete repair while it stood empty rather than let it to any tenant they did not much wish for, and who were now, as it were, giving it away rather than not have a tenant they did wish for; small for them, but large and ambitious for Godfrey. He felt this more strongly than ever as he pushed open the wicket, to which access was gained by a road branching off between the first and second tunnels, the gate for carriages being at the other side. It looked larger than ever to him as he glanced, first at the building and then at the two figures with their backs towards him, standing in the middle of the grass-plot before the house, and looking towards one of the upper windows.

They heard the click of the latch, and both turned as he came in.

'You look better,' he said to his sister, as he laid his hands on her shoulders and kissed her, while Alizon stood by, with a sudden change in her expression and a quick contraction of her eyebrows.

She shook hands with him, however, in her usual nonchalant fashion, and he took in the contrast of appearance between the two: Alizon in her light grey gown, and with that suppressed but not to be concealed fire and force about her; Hilda, tall and pale and almost severe-looking, with her handsome tired face and fine eyes, and her straight, uncompromising black gown and bonnet and gloves. How would they get on, he wondered. Would this be a visit of politeness—a civil attention on one side, and thanks on the other, and no more about it? He wondered much. He knew both to be natures somewhat outside the ordinary run. It did not, however, follow from that that they would be sympathetic.

'Well?' he asked Hilda, drawing her arm through his, and his face, too, turned towards the house, and then back again, first towards Alizon, then towards Hilda.

'Well?' repeated Hilda. 'That's a question. What is it intended to ask?'

'What do you think of it all? But you have not been inside

'No. But I can judge a good deal from the outside. I think it is a delightful place—a dream of a house. And I think Mr. and Miss Blundell'—she turned towards Alizon with a slight flush, and a rather nervous smile—'have been most kind and generous in thinking of it. But, Godfrey——'

'Now you are going to say something disagreeable,' said Alizon, abruptly, and looking very much annoyed, 'and I won't have it. No, I will not have it.'

'Pray, don't think me disagreeable,' said Hilda, earnestly. 'You know I was sent for to give my opinion, and I must give the true one. It is beautiful and delightful, as I say, but I think that for Godfrey—for any of us—it is more the kind of thing to end with than to begin with.'

'I never heard *anything* more disagreeable than that,' said Alizon. 'What a fortunate thing that your brother has already committed himself beyond recall!'

Hilda smiled—this time with less constraint. She had evidently felt that it was her duty to say what was on her mind, and she had said it, and was glad it was over.

'I have no more to say,' she declared. 'And I'm speaking for myself. Godfrey is much wiser than I am. If he is satisfied, I can quite believe I am wrong, and I will give him all the advice I can about the furniture and so on.'

'Then shall we go in?' Godfrey said, looking at them.

'You go in—you two,' said Alizon, after a sharp inward struggle with herself. 'I know the whole place, and I am sure you don't want me bothering while you are deciding about your things.' She smiled pleasantly, not being given to doing things by halves. 'Meantime, I will just speak to Bayles, the gardener, who, I see, has been doing exactly what I told him not to do to those flower-beds.'

Before they could say anything, she had nodded cheerily to them and turned away. She had no intention of returning. She walked quickly in the direction of a small glass-house at the south side of the building.

Arrived there, before she opened the door she stood still, her hand on the handle, her brows contracted, her eyes fixed upon the ground, thinking to herself:

'She has more than I have. He is real. All that goodness of his, which I could have laughed at so when I first saw him, is real. Everything that passes between them, it is all real. Oh, if Peregrine would ever be real—for a day—an hour! I could do without everything else . . . . and I have nearly everything else—but I shall never have that.'

She turned the handle, entered the green-house, and in her clearest, curtest voice, cried:

'Bayles?'

Godfrey and Hilda had entered the house. She turned round in the broad, low hall, which was in reality only a passage with a parlour-door opening on either hand and the staircase going up to one side, but which was so broad and square as to give a different effect.

'It is a nice place, Godfrey—a sweet peaceful place,' she said, looking round it. 'How happy you and Letty will be here. She will be in Paradise. How often I shall think of you both, in this cool, clean retreat, when the sun is beating into the big class-room and the dust is whirling about in the draught of the transoms, and I am straining every nerve to make fifty girls understand what I want them to do, and how I want them to do it.'

'And we shall think of you just as often. You are to come upstairs now, Hilda, and choose exactly which room you like best. It will be your very own. We will put into it everything you like, and no other person shall occupy it.'

They went upstairs, walked about the rooms, and Hilda said:

'Ought not Letty to have the first choice? She will be the mistress here.'

'Yours is the first choice. I decided that from the very first.'

'Don't think that I'm down at the contrast between this and my own,' she assured him. 'This will be a delicious place to come to, but to live in—no, I never could!'

They were now seated side by side on the window-seat of the room she had said she would like, and were looking from the window towards a brown moorland ridge which just showed between the tree-tops.

'Did Miss Blundell meet you?' he asked. 'And how did you get on?'

'Oh, she met me, and I like her. I do like her. I think I see what you mean by her brusqueness. But I don't mind that. She was not brusque to me.'

'I'm glad she was not. She can be fifty things—just what it pleases her to be at the moment. And he—did you see him too?'

'Her brother—your patient—do you mean?' said Hilda. 'Oh, certainly, I saw him. He lunched with us, and made

himself vastly amiable. What a pity that he should be so ill. He talked about you a little. He didn't say much, but he said it in a *way!*' she laughed, and squeezed Godfrey's arm. 'I will not inflate your natural self-conceit by repeating his words. I never saw any one with a better manner,' she rambled on, while Godfrey sat listening with a constriction at his heart, and a sudden feeling of discomfited foreboding. 'I don't wonder that you succumbed to their blandishments, old fellow, in the matter of coming here. If they were both as charming to you as they were to me, I don't see how you could help yourself. But, after all, what a tragedy in a young man's life! Nothing can make it otherwise. To have everything around him—all the world before him—and be a cripple, as it were, in the midst of it. No excitement—that means no pleasure, as well as no pain. Why, Godfrey, I suppose it would be quite wicked for a man in that condition even to *think* of getting married?'

This was said with a suddenly awakened look, as if the idea had only just occurred to her, and she sat looking at him inquiringly, with open eyes.

Godfrey had never in his life loathed himself so much (and surely most of us have moments or hours of self-loathing which we could not describe, which we can only remember) as in this moment, when no effort of his will could enable him to look Hilda in the face as frankly and as carelessly as she was looking at him, or could prevent his throat from feeling dry and his voice from sounding slightly husky, as he replied:

'For that, my dear Hilda, he has done it already—long ago, before he was ill. He has a wife—and two little children. He got tired of the wife, and leaves the children alone. It is a hateful business. No one but a man with a mortal illness on him could have acted as he has done without any evil social consequences.'

'Married!' ejaculated Hilda, and at first her eyes, as wide open as ever, did not waver from his face. Then, as she continued to look, a change came over her own. A flash of insight revealed to her the unspoken thought that had been in Godfrey's mind—revealed to her that he thought it was well she should know of Peregrine Blundell's matrimonial bonds. Why? Because she had spoken of the young man's condition with sympathy and interest. Godfrey had, for one single instant, allowed himself to imagine a possibility—that she, in half an hour's intercourse with a complete stranger, could become interested enough in that stranger to make it desirable that

he should have addressed to her a word of warning, strong though indirect.

Insulted to her inmost being, she rose abruptly from the window-seat. What did this behaviour on her brother's part mean? Distrust, surely, of her or of his friend, or of both. Its immediate effect was to make her more angry with Godfrey than she had ever been before, or had ever imagined that she could be, and to rouse in her mind a passionate protest in favour of Peregrine. With a hasty retrospective glance she reviewed all that had happened; the few courteous remarks he had addressed to her, his simple and gracious manner of playing the host, and his entire freedom from any over-emphasis of manner, either polite or the reverse. That he should be suspected!

All this passed through her mind in the space of a few seconds. Almost as she rose from her seat she had recovered complete mastery over herself.

'Heavens!' she exlaimed, flippantly. 'What a mercy that I perpetrated no *bêtise* on the subject of wives and children while we were at lunch. Did I? Let me see. No, I am sure I did not. It is wonderful, because if there ever does happen to be such a dark tabooed subject, one is pretty sure to be directed straight to it, by providence or something else. But I didn't. It is a good thing you told me.'

He said nothing. Hilda was now walking round the room, measuring its size in paces, but, in spite of this prosaic and trival employment, her tall slender figure was stiff and drawn to its utmost height, and in the ring of her voice there was nothing genial.

She could hardly force herself to speak, and they were both relieved when, as they were in one of the other rooms—that which was to be Letty's—they at last, but only after repeated efforts on his part, became aware that Bayles the gardener, at the foot of the stairs—too modest to come up, too diffident to call out—was giving utterance to a series of the most unearthly coughs and 'hems,' to attract their attention. Godfrey went to the head of the stairs.

'Miss Blundell sent you word by me as how she was called back to th' heawse, and you wasn't to hurry yersels, but just to come down when you was ready, and you'd find her at home, waitin' for ye; and would you plase to lock th' front dur, and bring th' key along o' ye?'

'We will,' said Godfrey, laughing and returning to Hilda.

There was not much more to be said or done. Their furni-

ture would all go into that house without any need to contrive for its arrangement. They went out, locked the door, according to Bayles's behest, strolled round the garden and the orchard, said a great deal about Letty, and very little about the Blundells or each other, and then found their way back to the house. Baker showed them into the drawing-room. Hilda's pale face had a slight, bright flush on it, and her eyes were unusually animated. They had been burning brighter ever since those words of Godfrey's. Her head was erect, as she advanced into the room and towards the group there assembled, which consisted of the two Blundells and Harold Ashby, who had casually called.

'Here you are,' said Alizon, cordially. 'Come here!' she added, laying her hand on Hilda's shoulder, with a gesture of the most genial friendliness, and moving her towards a comfortable-looking easy-chair, in the close vicinity of both Peregrine and Harold. The two young men had risen and were standing by, looking on.

'This is Mr. Ashby, a friend of ours,' said Alizon, and young Ashby made a profound bow. He had been attentively observing Hilda from the moment of her entrance.

'I've heard my brother speak of you,' said Hilda, smiling. 'You live in America, don't you?'

'I live there, I suppose,' said Ashby, laughing. 'At any rate America is my country, and the Stars and Bars my flag, but it seems to me I have been living in England a pretty good while, and am likely to continue doing so.'

'You like it so much?'

'I do *like* it,' replied he, with his indescribable Baltimore drawl. 'But don't ask me to commit myself further than that.'

They laughed. Baker, at this juncture, brought in tea, and the group had to move a little, so as to accommodate Alizon and her tea-table. When they had subsided again, Hilda found that Peregrine's chair was at her elbow, Alizon at some little distance away, with Harold Ashby, standing beside her, and Godfrey seated not far from her, conversing with a queer-looking wire-haired white terrier.

'See what Mr. Ashby and I have been studying,' said Peregrine, gravely, to Hilda. 'We were alone for some time, and had to do something—to preserve our reason, or reasons, intact.'

'The *Ladies' Mirror!*' cried Hilda, bursting out laughing, in spite of herself, as she opened that voluminous journal at a full-page illustration of some of the latest things in costumes and mantles.

'Yes, the *Ladies' Mirror*. I'm very fond of the *Ladies' Mirror*, are you not? We take it here for my special benefit, and I read it through nearly every week.'

'I cannot believe it. You must excuse me, but I really cannot.'

'Ah, that is because you are so intellectual and so busy, you have no time for such frivolities. If your only chance of getting a little society was by reading about all the people who were at last week's Drawing-room, or Lady Smithereen's drum, you would study the *Ladies' Mirror*, I can tell you, and be thankful for it.'

'Well, perhaps I might. Which is your favourite portion of it?'

'Some of the advertisements I like very much,' said Peregrine, judicially. 'They are awfully interesting, and most mysterious to the unsophisticated mind, such as mine.' He looked at her with unchanged gravity, and Hilda bent her head to hide a broad smile. 'Then,' he went on, 'there's another lot of things that I read and re-read. They fascinate me, and when I've once begun I can't leave off till I come to the end. *The Adornment of the Home*, it's called. All about furnishing rooms, and things—answers to correspondents, you know—all this stuff about how to do up your house, and your old furniture in muslin rags and new paint. Only it seems to me that they are all like a flock of sheep,' he continued, warming with his subject. 'They profess that they think it beautiful, when, as a matter of fact, it's just what some one else has said is going to be the fashion. Drain-pipes, for instance; they seem to be all the go now, from what is said here. I don't really think a drain-pipe is a nice thing to have in a drawing-room, do you?—less on account of its inherent ugliness, than because of its associations!'

'No, I never have admired them.'

'Ah, I thought we should agree. Then listen to what this woman tells *Blue Butterfly* she is to do. "Put a bright yellow art-pot on your piano-top. This, with a drapery of Liberty muslin at sixpence halfpenny per yard, and three bulrushes in a long, narrow, drain-pipe, with a gauze tinsel scarf knotted round it, will give the effect you desire." How in heaven's name does she know what effect the poor demented creature desires?' added Peregrine, indignantly. 'An effect of Bedlam let loose, I should say. Would they take any suggestions from me, do you think, if I were to send them?—such as—"An empty red earthenware flower-pot of large size, splashed with

a little green mould, standing on a three-legged stool, into which should be negligently thrown a number of glittering empty sardine tins. A bit of red flannel—new, if you have it—tied round one of the legs of the stool will give a quaint effect in a dark corner, and will add much to the general impression of culture produced by the pair of green-glass vases you received when you bought a pound of Smith's two-shilling tea."'

'Peregrine!' said Alizon, shaking her head. 'Isn't it base of him, Miss Noble, to pry into all these innocent secrets and then make game of them?'

Hilda laughed.

'I confess I rather sympathise about that. I think his suggestion is quite as good as some of the *bonâ-fide* ones.'

'Then you do read them?' Peregrine pounced upon her with lightning quickness. 'Aha! You are capable of these weaknesses after all.'

'I don't read them habitually—that would have a dangerously weakening effect on the brain, which I could not afford to risk. But I do read them sometimes.'

'A little of it rests your brain, where much would weaken it?' he asked with anxious solicitude.

'I suppose so.'

'I should not like to miss my *Ladies' Mirror*,' said Peregrine, giving it an affectionate pat, as he laid it down. 'Halloa, Ashby, you are not going?' for both Ashby and Godfrey had risen.

'I must go back to Moorside. I have business there before I come back to dinner,' said Godfrey.

Peregrine looked at his sister. He wanted her to ask Ashby to stay to dinner too. But she would not take his hint. The young man took his leave. He shook hands with Hilda, and in set terms expressed his pleasure at having made her acquaintance, adding:

'Every one is very glad that your brother is coming to settle here. Do you come with him?'

'No,' she said, with a little reserve. 'My work keeps me in town. I can only come in my holidays.'

'Then,' said Harold, in the same rather precise, formal, but quite unembarrassed manner, while the others listened in some surprise, 'I expect my sister and I will still be here when your vacation begins, and I shall hope for the pleasure of renewing our acquaintance.'

Somewhat startled and embarrassed at the unusualness of

this leave-taking, Hilda yet managed to say that he was very kind, and he then went away. Peregrine walked to the door with them, and then returned. He found Alizon and Hilda looking at one another, each with a suppressed smile on her face.

'Miss Noble, if you will excuse plain-speaking, you have most distinctly mashed that unhappy young man,' said he, looking at her, with a rather provoking smile.

'I don't know,' said Hilda. 'I think—it was very, very extraordinary,' she finished off, with an embarrassed laugh.

'Very,' said Alizon, with a queer smile, 'and I think my brother is not far from the mark. Now come upstairs. I want you to get a rest before dinner. You may say that you are not tired, but I judge for myself in such matters, and I say that you are.'

She put her arm through Hilda's and led her away.

Peregrine, left alone amidst the *débris* of tea-things, tables and chairs, leaned his back against the mantelpiece, and kicked his heel upon the rug.

'It's beyond everything,' he said, vexedly, to himself. 'Is one never to look at a girl just because—— And what eyes! Noble never said his sister was handsome, among her other perfections. Perhaps he didn't know it.'

With a little sneering laugh, he shrugged his shoulders.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

HILDA ALONE.

Hilda found herself alone in the bedroom which had been assigned to her, when Alizon Blundell had pointed out to her a couch on which to rest, a table for her book, a soft quilted cover for her feet, and many other appliances of what seemed to Hilda luxury. The room was, like most of the upstairs ones at Great Undermoor, not very large, but communicating with another, smaller than itself, which served as a dressing-room. It was panelled and ceiled with oak, and there was a great, lumbering, oaken bed, taking up the greater part of the space in the room. The long, low window had a deep window-seat, and the view was in the direction of the fishponds and the woods. With all her six-and-twenty years, her past life of self-suppression, and her present one of heavy responsibility and

full occupation, Hilda Noble was, in many respects, a mere girl, and a young girl therewith. She and hers had never had any rich relations, so that she was not familiar, even in the houses of others, with luxury or the absence of any apparent consideration of money or of what things cost. They had always been a family who made few friends. Their mother had never encouraged the habit in their childhood, because she, with a keen recollection of what had been, and a vivid sense of what she considered the position to which they were entitled, had not cared for them to associate with their neighbours in the second-class street in which they had lived, the said neighbours being generally, to tell the truth, as second-class as the street itself. They had always, from habit and from her teaching, kept to themselves.

It was only within the last two years that Hilda had begun to have acquaintances amongst the more opulent people of the town in which they lived; and so fastidiously had Mrs. Noble in her poverty brought up her children, that these opulent ones often did not please Hilda at all. Godfrey might have friends. If so, they were certainly not rich, and the slight but never-lifting cloud under which he had lived in regard to his mother ever since his choice of a profession had not been an encouraging atmosphere into which to bring any companions. Thus they had one and all lived singularly secluded lives, acquainted with all due forms of polite observance, and with the ways and manners of gentlefolk, rigidly practising these usages among themselves, but rarely, indeed, emerging from their own circle.

The present situation, therefore, was a comparatively new one to Hilda, and as she laid herself upon the couch, and drew the coverlet over her feet, feeling really tired with her exertions —for she had had to leave home very early—she began to think things over—things towards which she had rarely been in the habit of turning her attention.

'How nice they are, these people!' she reflected, not in orderly, well-arranged thoughts, but in a somewhat fragmentary manner. 'Their ways and manners seem to me so simple and easy. I am sure I could far more easily tell Miss Blundell any woes about—a stupid servant, for instance, or a domestic crisis, than I could any of those rich people on the committee at home! I wonder why they are like that? Because it has always been the same with them, I suppose. There has been no difficulty. They have never known anything else. All their lives they have had this beautiful old house to live in, and as much money to spend as they wanted. They know there are

poor people. They have them round their own gates, I daresay, and to them I feel sure they are very kind. They understand, too, that there is yet another kind of poor people—those who are not beneath them in education, and who can appreciate most of the things they have, and who yet have no money but what they earn, and earn with difficulty and toil. They must know that both Godfrey and I are that sort of people, but I don't think they truly realise what it means. How should they? They treat me as if I were one of themselves. Of course, that is only polite—yet I wonder why it is only polite. It is always polite for a rich person to treat a poor one as his equal. It would be uncivil, I suppose, for a poor person so to treat a rich one. There is a stigma attaching to poverty, of course—always will be. Well, but how different must all the background be, in their lives and in mine! What do they look back upon? I'm sure I do not know,' Hilda decided within herself, with a rather cynical smile. 'How can I know? We have no common experiences. What do such people do in their youth? They don't do; it is all done for them, I should think. They have servants to wait upon them, and they are educated as well and as fastidiously as possible, I suppose. Is that it? And if they have character of their own, born with them, they have so much the more scope for giving it full play, and doing as they please. What is to hinder you from going about dressed almost like a beggar when it is your own ground and your own wood in which you go about? Miss Blundell has the character, evidently. She is very kind and very good, but it pleases her to be so. She isn't obliged to be amiable to all kinds of dull, tedious, or exasperating people, because her very livelihood depends upon pleasing them. She is as free as any one can be. She can develop herself in almost any way she pleases. That *must* make a difference. When they have not much character or originality, I suppose they go gently meandering on in the beaten track: not offensive, because they have the polish of so many generations fairly rubbed into them, but not of much account, either—or they get into mischief, I suppose. Some of them do. If they are girls they go mad on dress and amusement. If they are men they go to college, and make debts, no doubt. They come home, or they go abroad, and they get married to the wrong people——' she opened her eyes wide and looked up at the oaken beam which ran across the ceiling; then, more slowly, in her own mind, 'and trouble comes of it, of course. Misunderstandings; wretchedness. And then Fate

steps in, and makes their lives tragic for them sometimes; even though they may not have a single tragic element proper to themselves. It gives them a heart-complaint, and cuts everything short; snaps in twain every possibility, except those of keeping quiet and giving things up.'

Again she pondered: 'Could anything be less tragic-looking than that young man, with his smile, and his easy, unembarrassed manners, and his nonsense about being very fond of reading the *Ladies' Mirror?*' She smiled to herself, not at all cynically this time. 'He comes into his sister's drawing-room and hands round the cups, and makes himself agreeable to her guests, and all the time, in the background, he is married, and hates his wife, and keeps aloof from his children, and is, himself, mortally ill. Yet we all go on talking and laughing, as if no such things as hate and love and death existed, or at any rate as if they would never trouble *us*, rude, unmanageable things that they are! And I suppose some people would say that our souls are in a bad way.'

She laughed a little.

'And I, who come to them, and sit with them, and speak and look as if it were all as much of an everyday thing to me as it is to them—what have I to think of? Nothing so sensational as separation from a hated husband, and a heart-complaint. And I am certain that of all these three things—love, and hate, and death—only one will ever cross my path, and that is the last. I shall never live. I shall die without knowing what life is. Work and death for me, and nothing else. What a grey, dreary prospect is my backward one! All those years of that horrible trying to make both ends meet; all that waiting, that working, with no definite object; no brightness, no independence, no room to expand. That is the thing! I do think that must be the greatest harm that want of money does. It prevents you from expanding. You may grow—in a kind of way—spread out your branches, but just where there happens to be room for them; not where you wish to spread them. You want to spring up, and see above the house-tops, over the country beyond—but no! The only room is a little space on each side of you, along the dusty earth of a city backyard, or straight in front of you, but always low down and along the ground. You keep up the forms of civilised life which you have been taught, because you see your mother thinks them things of vital importance. But all the time you feel as if it did not really matter in the least. Why should you insist upon your one servant putting on a white apron and

changing your plates at dinner-time? Ridiculous! It would be much more sensible, and more suitable to your circumstances, if you got up and changed them yourselves. Why should you scold her severely if she is not ready and "dressed," as they call it, to open your front door to callers, when you know as well as possible that not three callers a year present themselves at that door? Then you appoint an afternoon in each week when you will be "at home," and you sit in state, and make your daughters do the same, and no one comes; and at last you fold up your work and say, "Well, dears, I think it is too late now for any one to call." As if you had expected any of the three or four people you know to call, or to remember anything about your "afternoon!"'

Hilda's face had been growing darker and darker as these thoughts crowded ever more thickly into her mind. At this point, with a sudden catch in her breath, she clenched her hands together on her bosom, started from her recumbent position, and, between short painful sobs, kept exclaiming:

'Oh, mother, mother! Forgive me? How I hated it! And you were right, as you always were. It was of use. It began to be of use when I was promoted to be the head of a big school, and knocks did come to the door, and people did discover where we lived, and came to see us. It is very useful now, when I am here in rich people's houses. I know how to behave without making too great a nincompoop of myself. Yes, you were right—and what does it all come to, in the end?'

She began to laugh almost hysterically between her sobs, and to pace the room ever more and more rapidly, a kind of grim amusement struggling with her physical weariness, and with the agonised revival of her feelings at the time of her mother's death. These last became more and more acute, and she was nearly strangled with the sobbing which she almost unconsciously strove to keep as silent as possible. She was so lost in the tumult of her agitation that she heard nothing of a gentle knock on the door until it had been repeated a little more loudly. Thinking it must be a servant, she called 'Come in!' and choked back as much as she could of her emotion. The door was opened, and some one, entering, confronted her. It was no servant, but her hostess, Alizon Blundell.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A DECLARATION OF LOVE.

For once in her life Alizon stopped short, bereft of presence of mind, and stood, her eyes fixed on Hilda's face.

'I must beg your pardon,' she began at last, almost stammering.

'Oh, no! Pray come in. Was it—what was it?' asked Hilda, at her wits' end, hearing the thick, broken sound of her own voice, conscious that her eyes must be red and her face disfigured, and fully aware that those eyes would miss no detail even had her appearance been less agitated than, she was sure, it was.

'It is——' began Alizon; and then, with a sudden motion as if she had rapidly made up her mind to some course, she decisively closed the door behind her, and advanced into the room towards Hilda.

'It was this,' she said, her voice deepening, and a heightened colour—a most infrequent thing with her—coming over her face; 'I thought, if you were awake, you perhaps would not mind it much if I came in and said a few words to you; and I thought, if you were asleep, I could see that you were covered up and warm. I don't fancy you are in the habit of taking much care of yourself. I wanted to look at you, and see that you were still here—that was the fact. And here you are, neither sleeping nor yet resting properly, but walking about, when you were already so tired, and distressing yourself about something. What is it? Why are you troubling yourself?' she demanded, coming still nearer to Hilda, who stood still, almost as if transfixed, gazing at her. Her heart beat thickly and fast.

'I—I was thinking,' she began, feebly.

'You were thinking,' repeated the other, her strange powerful eyes gazing into those of Hilda in a way which caused the latter to thrill, she knew not why. 'I knew you were going to think,' Alizon went on. 'I saw it in your face. That was just what I was afraid of. And your thoughts have not been happy ones. First, you were very tired. Do you think I don't know? I am never tired myself, but I always know when others are. And your thoughts went, as the thoughts of tired people always do go, straight to the most painful things of your life,

either in the past or the present. Once there, they could not escape. Am I not right?'

She laid her hands upon Hilda's shoulders, and looked, not commandingly, but still as if she would compel an answer sooner or later.

'Yes,' Hilda almost whispered. 'It was everything, I think —all came back to me—my whole life—and my life has been a sad one. It was what happened last, though, that brought this on. I had been thinking of things my mother used to insist on our doing when we were quite young and very poor, and which used to fret and vex me so dreadfully. Then, all at once, I knew how right she had been, and I realised, more than I have ever done before, that she is dead.'

Her voice dropped to a deep whisper, almost a sob.

'I could lie down no longer, thinking of these things—that is all. I am ashamed to have lost my self-control in this way —in a strange house, too; making such a nuisance of myself. But I did not expect to see any one before dinner-time. I should have been all right then.'

She looked at Alizon, as if scarcely hoping to convince her by what she said.

'You might have thought yourself "all right." You might have behaved as if you were; but I don't think you would have deceived me,' said Alizon, still looking at her, still resting her hands lightly on her shoulders. Then, suddenly and quickly, 'Tell me, are you pleased at what your brother has done—about Little Undermoor, I mean? I don't believe you are. All the time I was conscious that you were opposed to me in the matter. Tell me the truth.'

'I told the truth then. I am pleased at your goodness to him. I am pleased that he should have such a home. I am sure he deserves it. I am happy to think how happy Letty—my sister—will be there. But I do not feel as if it would turn out well, somehow. It is delightful, but I am sure he ought to have begun in a much more humble way.'

Alizon nodded gravely.

'I knew you had something hateful of that kind in your mind,' said she. 'I am glad you have spoken it out. I don't mind about it. It will all pass away when you know me better —know me as well as your brother does.'

'That is not likely ever to be the case,' said Hilda, smiling faintly.

'That just depends upon yourself. Perhaps you are not like me. I form my judgments of people on the spot. I formed

my judgment of you at once, as I shook hands with you on the platform at the station. If you will, we shall know each other very well indeed. Have you many friends?'

'Very few indeed.'

'I thought so. I am in the same case. We will not make any professions. I hate them. But if you choose to try what friendship with me means, why, I am very wishful to have you for my friend. Will you?'

She held out her hand. Hilda looked at her in wonder and astonishment. She might not form her judgments of others with the promptitude spoken of by Alizon, but she had at once appreciated the latter as a strong character and an unusual one. She slowly raised her hand towards that of this self-professed new friend, looking her in the face all the time with a mixture of question, wonder, and pleasure—a dawning, not a fully developed pleasure.

'You hesitate,' said Alizon. 'You think I am too rough and abrupt. I repel you, and you could never care for such a female bear as I seem to you.'

'No,' said Hilda, solemnly and sweetly. 'I was thinking that if we were friends—such friends as I think you mean—the gain would be all on my side, and there would be none on yours. I think, if you were my friend, I should never feel afraid again. Every time I thought of you I should have rest and comfort. But what could I give you in exchange for such a thing as that?'

'Only your heart, my dear, and your kindness, and your love, and your forbearance. Mere trifles, not worth mentioning. You would need them all, especially the two last, to carry you along with me. I should also gain the kind of companion for my mind that I have so often wanted; some one who knows so much more than I do, in some ways, and so very much less in others,' she added, laughing a little. 'Let it be! We shall both be so much the richer. Why should we not be rich, if we may?'

'Gladly would I be rich—in that way,' said Hilda, returning the warm pressure of Alizon's hand. 'But I cannot believe it. It is a dream. I am sure it must be a dream.'

'You are an unbeliever. I soon found that out,' said Alizon. 'You don't believe in happiness, or in joy that is lasting. You only believe in being anxious. Now I can and do believe in good things. I believe in this—this that we have settled now. Ah, how much I love you!' she added; 'and how much good I am sure I can do you.'

She bent forward and kissed Hilda tenderly; then, taking her back to the couch, sat down beside her, softly stroking one of her hands, and looked at her piercingly and affectionately.

'Cry as much as you please, Hilda Noble,' she said. 'I don't cry, but I know there are people to whom it does good. I fancy you are one of them.'

'No, I don't want to cry now,' said Hilda, laying her head on Alizon's shoulder, and drawing a long, deep breath. 'It is a miracle! It must be a miracle!' she said.

'Why a miracle? and what a miracle?' asked the other.

'This. In all my life no one ever said or did anything like it before. I shall never be able to believe it.'

'Oh, yes, you will; and soon we shall both quite understand how very good it was for us to know each other.'

Her strong, confident tone put confidence into Hilda also. Alizon seemed to her an embodiment of power, able to do just as she wished.

'I am glad I came,' said the latter. 'I was very much afraid. But if I had not risked it I should have lost it all. You would have come down to dinner, looking infinitely self-possessed, whatever you might have felt, with your eyelids down, looking as contemptuous as possible——'

'What nonsense!' cried Hilda. 'I never looked in that way in my life.'

'Indeed! Then perhaps something in the air here has given you that expression since you came. Whatever the reason, it is there. So you would have looked. I should have shrivelled up and said nothing, and you would have gone away—are you really obliged to go away to-morrow?'

'Yes, unless I get up in the middle of Sunday night in order to be at my post on Monday morning.'

'Well, we shall have to go to Calliards—the junction, you know. It will be a pleasant drive. You won't mind if my brother should want to come too?'

'Mind? Of course not!'

'And you will come to your brother in the holidays, and so we shall get to know all about each other? It is a perfect arrangement. Now, I grieve to say, the dinner-hour approaches. I shall have to go and change my frock.'

'I did not bring a second dress,' began Hilda.

'No, of course not—for one night, and a business visit, and you in mourning. You will find your way to the drawing-room, won't you?'

She departed, turning round at the door to cast a smile and

a backward glance at Hilda, who was likewise standing up, looking after her, and smiling.

Again alone, she mechanically went about her operations, removing her dress before she rearranged her hair, and doing that also in a kind of dream. She seemed all at once to see her own face reflected; it flashed upon her as if it had not been there before at all. With astonishment she saw the change in it, and wondered and speculated over it.

'It is very wonderful,' she kept saying to herself, as she went on with her modest toilette. 'What can it be that made her do such a thing? What does it all mean?'

For, though she felt something new and strange in her moral atmosphere, Hilda did not clearly realise that she had just received the first declaration of love that had ever been made to her in all her six-and-twenty years; and that with it had come the transformation of all everyday things into something wonderful and remarkable, which such declaration usually brings with it.

But she suddenly remembered the scene at Little Undermoor, and Godfrey's warning tone, which she had so bitterly resented. Poor Godfrey!

'If there ever could have been any danger, under ordinary circumstances,' she said to herself, 'it would be quite impossible now. The idea of hesitating between him and her!'

She went downstairs, feeling wondrously light of heart, and found that Godfrey had already arrived. She saw that he gave her a glance of some solicitude. He was sorry, doubtless, for the annoyance which he must have caused her. She bore no malice. It was all over. She spoke to him with all the old familiar geniality, laying her hand lightly on his shoulder for a moment as she spoke to him, and she saw the shadow lift from his face and contentment return to his eyes.

At dinner-time something was said about driving Hilda to Calliards on the following afternoon—the Sunday. Peregrine asked Godfrey to join them.

'I think I had better not,' said he. 'There's a sort of prejudice against Sunday excursions up at Moorside, and it's of no use running counter to it.'

Peregrine muttered and grumbled, and said it was too absurd to pay any attention to such played-out, bigoted nonsense—which epithet he descended on after apparently considering and rejecting others.

'You always go out on Sunday at home, Godfrey,' said his sister.

'But I'm not at home, you see—very far from it.'

'You are under no obligations to those people, I am sure,' said Peregrine, huffily.

'Well, I think I am—at least, so far as not to do anything diametrically opposed to their interests while I'm here.'

'It would teach them a good lesson,' said Peregrine.

'It would more likely make a lot of the poor, Sabbath-ridden creatures say, "We will never come again to this unholy spot,"' said Alizon, joining this discussion for the first time. 'Dr. Noble is quite right, Peregrine. He always is when he opposes you. When he has got away from that ridiculous place, and is in his own home, he can do a great deal more as he chooses. Do you know,' she added, turning to Hilda, '*à propos* of this orthodoxy, what a nuisance are the pious English people abroad, who seem to go to the Continent for the express purpose of attending some little twopenny-halfpenny English church, and making as great a fuss over its parson as they did over the one they have left behind them at home? Well, a relation of ours—almost the only one we have—I mean Aunt Theodosia, Peregrine, of course—was at Rome, and one Sunday at lunch, at the *table d'hôte* of her hotel, she was asked eight times: "*Which* of the English churches have you been to this morning?" It never occurs to them to ask, "Do you go to church at all?" She got very much exasperated, and, as she has a bright idea now and then, it occurred to her always to use the same formula as a reply to these tedious questions. So, whenever she was asked again, she merely replied, "I am not of your religion." She found it answer admirably. There's nothing of the Dissenter in her appearance, and people usually took her for some distinguished Roman Catholic, or even for the votary of some ancient Oriental religion, but never for——'

'Now, Alizon! She objects to have it told what she is. She knows full well the social value of being still a member of the Established Church, on the outside, whatever you may be within.'

'Well, yes, she does. She will be coming to us, will Lady Theodosia. She always comes late in the summer, to recruit from her winter and spring campaign. You will see her when next you come, and then you can judge for yourself.'

Hilda wondered if Lady Theodosia were anything of a humbug, or a *poseuse;* in such case she would probably have a bad time of it at the hands of her nephew and niece. The evening passed quickly and pleasantly. When Godfrey left, he said

good-bye to his sister, saying he was sure he would not be able to come down before lunch on the following day, and they were leaving directly afterwards. Hilda went to bed, tranquil, but feeling as if a great deal had happened to her within the last twelve hours.

CHAPTER XXX.

HILDA IS PUZZLED.

'THERE will be just time for us to swallow some lunch at once, and set off at half-past, or directly afterwards,' said Alizon the next morning, as she returned with Hilda from a stroll round the gardens and ponds. 'It takes over an hour to get to Calliards. What are you going to do now?'

'Write a letter or two, if I may. I can post them at home. They must be done to-day, I am afraid.'

'Come here, then, into the library. You shall have it to yourself. I will not disturb you. Nay, with sublime self-abnegation I will take myself off altogether, until the fatal moment arrives when I must tell you to get ready for lunch—because we shall have to leave the instant it is over.'

Hilda thanked her. In a few minutes she found herself alone, in this pleasant room, lined with books, with the sunlight warmly streaming into it, and a small wood fire on the hearth. The blinds were half-way down. The tawny velvet curtains caught the sunshine and glowed under it. A clock ticked gently, with a quiet, demure sound, on the high mantelpiece. The writing-table was convenient. The chair was deliciously comfortable. She was in utter solitude.

At first, mechanically, she drew towards her some writing paper, took a pen, and began: 'My dear Mrs. Furnivall.' Then she paused.

Mrs. Furnivall was an influential and difficult member of the committee, who was then abroad, and who had to be approached with what tact and finesse Hilda could compass, on the subject of some extra expenditure. Debating what to say to her, Hilda leaned back in her chair, doing her best to frame a masterly opening sentence to her letter, but very much let and hindered by the presence of the many and vivid new impressions which had been heaped upon her since her arrival, scarce twenty-four hours ago. Now it was the upper room at Little Undermoor, with herself and Godfrey, and the words that had

passed between them. Now the scene between Alizon and herself. It was all like a dream, but a dream with an uncommonly solid foundation. Then, the pleasant dinner-table last night, and some talk with Peregrine, both during the meal and afterwards.

'Well, he may have been selfish and bad. I wonder how much of it all is true, or what the real truth is . . . . I *must* get on with this thing. Oh, Mrs. Furnivall, I wonder if you know, in your villa by an Italian lake, where you enjoy yourself just as you please, how much trouble you are giving *me*. Well!'

'With reference to your letter of the 30th of May, which I gave to the secretary before the last committee meeting ——'

'Will that do for a beginning? We must have that money, and of course she will give it in the end. How can I gently lead round to it?'

Again she paused, her elbows on the writing-table, cogitating.

'Good-morning, Miss Noble,' said Peregrine's voice, behind her.

She started, and turned, smiling slightly. Peregrine always breakfasted in his own room, and sometimes scarcely appeared downstairs before lunch. He came down, however, often enough not to make his appearance now seem anything remarkable. To Hilda, knowing nothing of his ways, it would not have appeared remarkable in any case.

'Am I interrupting you? I hope not,' he said; but, without waiting to hear if he was, he advanced into the room and stood with his back against the mantelpiece—a favourite position with him. He looked down upon her as she sat at the table.

'You can scarcely be said to be interrupting,' she replied, 'because I am not doing anything. I was only thinking about it.'

'Thinking is much harder work than doing,' observed the young man, seriously. 'What can you possibly have to think about on a Sunday morning? You are breaking the Sabbath, I consider, by this thinking.'

She laughed.

'Two disagreeable business letters which won't let my mind rest till I have attended to them.'

'Then I think I am doing a good deed in interrupting any such employment on your part in my house,' said Peregrine, with such charming graciousness that it would have been odious in his hearer to have perceived anything else in his words and demeanour.

Hilda thought how considerate he was of his guests—not being aware how much he was in need of a little mild amusement of any kind—flirtation, love-making, discussion, anything, in short, that had a little novelty about it.

'Then you don't go to church—"the English Church"?' she asked him, for something to say.

'No. At least very seldom. Alizon does. I can never tell why.'

Hilda was silent. She was not going to discuss Alizon and her motives with him.

'I don't go much, for a variety of reasons,' he told her, apparently feeling communicative, and smiling all the time. 'There are such a lot of sins to confess, and you have to say so often how bad you are. And it is so uncomfortably true. It makes me nervous.'

'I should scarcely have thought nervousness was the feeling——'

'Ah, then you admit without controversy, that you can quite believe I do find it uncomfortably trne? I know I am bad. I know what heaps of things I have done that I never ought to have done, and what still larger heaps I have left undone, don't you know? And then, of course, they tell you what to do to make it all right. People talk about parsons being time-servers, and giving in to the weakness and selfishness of society, and all that. I can't say that I find it so. I don't know what you think. I think they put it before you very plainly, what you ought to do. I can see it as clearly as possible. I know just what I ought to do. And the mischief of it is, I don't feel the least inclination in the world to do it. What do you think of that?' he asked her, suddenly, as he lifted himself into an upright position, and gazed earnestly down into her face.

'I——why, it is always difficult to give up things that we like, even when we know them to be wrong,' she said, hesitatingly.

'Of course, it is. The more I hear of what I ought to do, and the more I know of what I've left undone, the less inclined I am to "turn over a new leaf," as they say, and do differently. I like my own way. I like to have things as I want them. I don't feel it a bit of good for me to be curbed and bridled and disciplined. It is perfectly odious to me. I always come away from church feeling enraged. I am punished. I have punishment enough for all I have ever done wrong in being stricken with a mortal illness. Even if that were all it

would be enough. But it is not nearly all. When I stay at home, and don't go after any of your religious foolery, I am quite satisfied that in that alone I pay penance enough, and to spare, for all my misdoings. And that is the best thing to feel. I don't see the sense of being all upset about things that you can never alter, or make any different, do what you will.'

Hilda wondered whether he meant his own past deeds or his own future conduct, but did not ask, and Peregrine went on with great naïveté—or cynicism, she knew not which.

'But, when I go to church, I come away feeling that it isn't enough to sit still and try to behave myself under the ills I know of—there's always some stupid thing in the background, making you feel that you ought to *do* something, especially when you know there are things to your hand left undone. I know it would be right to do them, but I feel almost sure, too, that the vexation of owning myself beaten, which is what the doing of them would practically mean, would be so great, and consequences so hateful, that I should die of it. And I don't want to die yet, though I'm not of much good to any one alive. Do you see?'

'I think I know something about what you mean,' she said, almost unsteadily, and wondering why he had chosen to make such a confession to her, not liking him any the less for having made it. There was something engaging in the frank egoism of it: something pathetic in the open-hearted confession that he did not want to die yet. She wondered if he knew that she knew very well what he meant, but she never dreamed of approaching the subject.

'Last night,' he went on, 'you did not say much when Noble said he wouldn't drive with us to-day. Of course he was quite right. He has bound himself to those people, and he's just doing his duty by them. But you did remark to him that he went out at home on a Sunday, and I wondered what you thought about something else. My sister is rough on a fellow if he doesn't do right just because it is right. She always settles the question straight cut of her own head. If I had not lost my health I don't think there would ever have been a fellow less disposed to inquire into things than I am. But, with having been ill, I have read a great many things which otherwise I should not have done. I have read a great many free-thinking books; what they call free-thinking, at any rate: all about science and the Bible, and the here and hereafter, and the like. Have you read many books of that kind?'

'Yes, a good many.'

'And what is your conclusion in the matter?'

'In what matter? It is rather a wide field.'

'Ah, there you nail me, of course. I suppose I mean, are the religious people right, or are the free-thinking, scientific ones?'

'Why should they not both be right? At any rate, why should they not both be striving after the same things—and those things truth and perfection? How can true science and true religion be enemies?'

'Yes, I've heard something like that before. Only they do fight an awful lot. Each lot says the other lot is beginning at the wrong end. They seem to me to think so much more of showing the others wrong than of going on and doing what is right themselves. Or at least if they do try to do right themselves, they must have a little *sauce piquante* served up to flavour the dish, in the shape of a rap at their opponents.'

'Who ought not to be their opponents at all. I'm afraid I cannot furnish you with a "conclusion" in the matter. It seems to me that science, and religion too, are both perpetually growing if they be of the right kind; so that they can never be concluded either of them.'

'Well, but,' he persisted, 'what do *you* think? You must think something about it. When people tackle you and say: "Is there such a thing as heaven, or hell? Do you believe in God, and so on?" What do you say to that?'

'No one ever did ask me before like that,' said Hilda, half-smiling, and wondering why he had opened up the discussion. 'I do not know that I should answer, if I were asked. One may discuss such matters with friends, but one does not submit to be catechised on them.'

'Then you are angry with me for catechising you. Yet I do wish you would tell me one thing. When you do right, whatever you believe on these matters, you don't do it for the sake of avoiding hell or gaining heaven?'

'No.'

'I'll tell you the truth. These books that I read brought me great comfort in that line. It was very different from going to church and being made uncomfortable. I felt it really did not make much difference whether or not I did those disagreeable duties we have been speaking of. That there is a hell, is doubtful; besides the fact that I never heard of any heaven I should care to go to. So I felt it was all right if there was nothing at all. Now you, I am certain, are not what they call orthodox, but not for those reasons, eh?'

'Oh, heavens, no!' she ejaculated, horrified.

'Tell me your reasons, Miss Noble,' he said, and he took a chair and placed it beside the desk, and then, sitting close beside her, fixed his eyes upon her face.

They had, sometimes, something of the strong magnetism of Alizon's—a magnetism which stirred Hilda powerfully, with emotions she had never known before. She had said proudly to herself that whoever was the friend of Alizon would never hesitate in a choice between her and her brother. But what was this sensation she had, as he looked at her thus? She felt an oppression like suffocation on her breast. Hardly would her breath come; hardly could she force her thoughts back to the ostensible subject of their conversation. All she could think of was that it was very strange, and that she wished, and yet did not wish, she could escape from her present position, from the gaze of those inquiring eyes, and be alone, where she could breathe freely.

'I'm not what you think,' she said, at last succeeding in mastering herself somewhat. 'There are lots of things I don't agree with in the orthodox religion and in what one hears in church and chapel. There are lots of people, too, who are a disgrace to the faith they profess; but that faith is Christianity. When one has studied all the other things—the Positivism and Socialism, and all the rest of it—what do they give you that Christianity cannot give you? You can but be really religious, whatever you are; and I don't think religion has anything to do with creed, or no creed. But you must know that. It is an old story.'

'Can but be really religious! Make yourself miserable, without knowing whether you will ever get paid for it.'

'If you look upon it as a commercial transaction.'

'Well, the good people do, at any rate. There never was anything clearer. Behave yourself, and you shall come to heaven. Misbehave yourself, and you shall go to hell. And this other lot say they don't know whether there's anything at all on the other side.'

'But we know what there is on this side, and surely that is enough. Perhaps some day we shall know whether there is something behind the veil. Perhaps we never shall know. You say you liked those "free-thinking doctrines," as you call them, because they would let you do as you wished, without any twinges of conscience. Perhaps that was the beginning, but it will not be all. You will love them because you will learn from them those great unchangeable laws which we

have to obey if we would be happy, or religious either; those laws which make you yourself answerable for every sin and every slip and every idle word. They are so remorseless. They won't let you be bad for a long time and then turn round and repent at the eleventh hour. Every deed must be paid for in its own coin, and the interest goes on accumulating. The children and the children's children must help to pay the parents' debts of sin of every kind. Nothing can turn those laws aside from their working: nothing will get them to make wrong into right; no sophistry can turn them aside from their course, and no agony or prayers or repentance can arrest their progress for one moment. If you disobey them, you shall be crushed. If you obey them, you shall be happy, and shall prepare the way for others to be happy, too. Whatever you thought about it at first, I am sure that is how you will come to look upon it. Perhaps you have come to do so already, only you won't say so.'

She had at last forgotten her strange emotion in the fervour of her conviction on these things. Her hands were clasped upon the table before her, her eyes were fixed upon his with glowing earnestness. There was a silence, Peregrine looking down for some time, till at last he again raised his eyes and looked at her, and again that shiver took possession of her, as he said, with a slight, indescribable smile:

'I believe you are a Puritan.'

She did not know whether to be more shocked or relieved; whether, indeed, she ought not to feel humiliated that at the end of her exhortation that was all the reply it had called forth. But she answered quickly, after a moment's pause:

'Indeed, I am not. I am pleasure-loving—fond of luxury and ease, and everything that is delightful—if it is right to have it. But it never has been right for me. It never will be.'

'And for me?' he asked, in a low voice, and with the same smile—a smile which Hilda, she knew not why, shrank from meeting.

'How can I judge for you?'

'No, of course. I can judge for myself, I suppose. Every one is better than I am,' he added, discontentedly. 'Your brother—look at him. He is good all through. I'm sure it is no trouble to him. My sister—she does things as a matter of course which I *could* not do. I can see what you are. Then there's Giles Barras. He's an old friend of ours—such a good fellow; unselfish and upright to the core, is Giles. And I—it bores me so, you know.'

'Yet you want to be good,' said she, unable to refrain from smiling. 'Perhaps we are not really all so good. Perhaps you are better than you think you are; or why do you think so much about it?'

'Because I've plenty of time on my hands, and plenty of material for thinking on. Well, you must excuse me for having let such a thing loose upon you as this conversation. It has been taking a base advantage of your friendlessness. You will be afraid to come again.'

Hilda was silent, smiling a little. He went on:

'Unless you come to stay with the doctor, in your holidays. Shall you?'

'I think so.'

'Ah! By that time you will know more about me, and will not say that, perhaps, I am better than I think I am.' He turned his head in the direction of the window, and went on, almost without change of tone: 'There is Alizon walking in the garden with Giles. He must have looked in after church. I will go and make him stop for lunch. Excuse me, will you?'

She bowed her head, and Peregrine went out of the room. Far too agitated to think of her letter to Mrs. Furnivall, she hastily collected her papers together and went to her bedroom, where she busied herself in packing her travelling bag, so as to be ready for departure. When thus alone, she found the agitation, which had been only intermittent during her conversation with Peregrine, return, and as strongly as ever. Yet, on recalling what had passed, she could not fix upon any particular thing or things of sufficient importance to have caused it. What, then, did it mean? In a matter of this kind, poor Hilda was as lost, as helpless, and as puzzled as a baby might have been. What had Peregrine meant by looking at her as he had done? Was it a mere nothing? If so, why had it put her into such a fever of agitation? Ought he to have said to her: 'I believe you are a Puritan,' with that, to her, inexplicable smile? Had he really come wanting to discuss a religious or ethical matter with her? Or had he just used that to draw her out, and amuse himself by the spectacle of her agitation? For she was conscious that she had been agitated, and she hated herself for it. In a word, had he been seriously talking to her about high matters, or had he been flirting with her, in the most mundane, most audacious, and, as it appeared to her over-austere notions, most cynical fashion imaginable? One or the other, it must have been, she told herself; quite unconscious in her ignorance that there might

very easily have been a little of both in it. She was ashamed of herself for not being able to see at once, and decide offhand within herself.

Suddenly there came into her mind a test. What would Alizon have said if she could have heard every word of the conversation, if she could have seen her brother's manner, could have felt Hilda's heart-beats, and experienced this, her present, emotion? At first a hot colour rushed over her pale face, as she stood still, almost breathless, pondering the matter. Then she suddenly drew herself up, with a smile. 'If she could know all that, she would know that I am true, that there can be nothing wrong. As for him——,' all was doubt and uncertainty again, when she came to consider that. But she was a little calmed by having as it were referred the matter even in silence to the tribunal of her friend's judgment. She finished what she was doing, and went down to lunch, looking and feeling collected once more. Yet it had been, and she felt it, a strange episode, with something in it which she could not explain to her own satisfaction.

Giles was present at lunch, and was going to drive with them to Calliards when it was over. Calliards was a wayside junction on the Great Northern, where a Scotch express, tearing through on its way to London, slipped two or three carriages, which went on to Kirkfence, from which large town there were Sunday trains to other large towns all over the north of England, and, amongst them, to the one where Hilda lived. The drive to Calliards was through a pleasant moorland country. The day was a perfect day in early June, which perhaps means as perfect a day as is to be found in the whole year. It was a six-mile drive, and the way to the station lay through the village of Calliards, which was a pretty little place, with a trout stream running near it, and a celebrated inn, called the 'Spotted Trout'—one of the supposed old country inns which once upon a time perhaps merited their name, but which have now, in so many instances, degenerated into mere fashionable lounges, where high prices are paid for accommodation far inferior to what may be found at any ordinary unpretending hotel.

The 'Spotted Trout' had not degenerated so far. It had grown proud and independent, because of the great numbers of people who desired to be its guests. It had a smart young lady in the bar; it had correctly dressed waiters; it wrote its letters on tinted paper, elaborately stamped by Parkins and Gotto: and some people said that the charm of it all was gone. But in

one thing it yet excelled, and that was in the dinners or lunches or teas which it provided for the pleasure-parties who came to spend the day or a few hours within its shelter. Its cellar was noted, so was its cuisine; and this was a highly popular form of entertainment with many people from the country round. Sunday was not much of a day until later in the season, but even now there would be found some persons, eager for amusement or fresh air or good feeding, or all three, who would come out and pass a Sunday, or part of one, at the 'Spotted Trout,' returning home in the evening.

In driving to the station they had to pass this inn. They were in a wagonette, and Hilda and Peregrine, who sat on one side, had their backs to the building. Giles and Alizon looked directly upon it. As they drove rapidly past, a little girl, prettily dressed, ran out and looked at them, and then a young woman, her mother, darted after her to draw her in, uttering some words of remonstrance, while behind them appeared the slight figure of a young man. The child and its mother both looked up as the wagonette passed. The child cried out something. The mother, pretty and fashionably dressed, looked startled and alarmed. Hilda observed a change pass over Giles Barras's face, and she observed with surprise and a moment's alarm that for an instant the face of her new friend turned white, and that she caught her breath. It was but for an instant. Then she looked herself again.

Giles and Alizon had both truly cause to change countenance. Their eyes met for a moment, with an uneasy understanding in them. For it was Nelly and her little daughter who had so suddenly appeared in the doorway. The young man in the background was unknown to either of them.

In ten minutes more the express from Scotland had thundered through Calliards, leaving the slipped carriages behind it. Hilda had lost sight of her three companions, and was on her way to Kirkfence. After a slow, Sunday journey, of several hours' duration, she found herself, with her travelling bag in her hand, getting into the tramway car which would put her down almost at the door of the school. She smiled to herself as she contrasted her two drives, the vehicles, the circumstances, and the company. As a rule, on a week-day, these cars took freights of highly respectable middle-class people to and from town. On Sunday the company was quite different. Hilda observed her fellow-passengers. Almost opposite to her sat two young girls, seemingly from the country. They were

friends; they leaned against each other, shoulder to shoulder, giggling a little now and then, but, generally speaking, surveying things with round-eyed, open-mouthed interest and surprise. Next to them were two women; one, a respectable person, neatly dressed in mourning, the other, tall, lanky, dark, in a brilliant-hued bonnet, gown and shawl, with an expression of the deepest, most rooted melancholy. Her companion seemed conscious of this melancholy, and uneasy about it. She did her utmost to lift its victim out of it, or at any rate to prevent her from sinking further into it, and Hilda, greatly amused, noted the form taken by her efforts at consolation—a ceaseless monologue, not loud, but quite audible:

'And when we get in, if they've 'ad their tay, we'll get our tay, and it'll make no difference, not a bit, and then, if you're wantin' to leave early, you can. You'll 'ave 'ad your tay, and we can go when we like, you know.'

This, with slight variations, continued incessantly, but had no effect in raising the spirits of the coloured bonnet and shawl, which seemed to sink into ever-deeper gloom. Hilda's first amusement gave way to pity; surely the woman was under the shadow of some great calamity or loss which rendered life worthless to her. She stared straight before her, and replied only with sighs and gloom to her companion's profuse and repeated promises of 'tay.'

Suddenly a change takes place. The bell sounds, the car stops, and two more passengers enter. With a rustle and a bustle and a circumstance they prance up the car; two 'creatures,' very much so indeed, exactly alike in dress—faded but pronounced finery. They seat themselves opposite the two women, and in full view of the young girls. Then, with many laughs, shrugs, and much apparent gaiety, they converse volubly with one another in French, commenting freely on all they see, and making eyes at a couple of foolish-looking young men near the door. Things suddenly appear very lively. The two women sit silent and *look*—the cheerful one has even forgotten that they can have their 'tay' as soon as they get in. The mournful one, though she watches, does not seemed cheered. The two young girls open their eyes and mouths as wide as they will go, and sit shoulder to shoulder, staring at the two new-comers. An involuntary shudder seized Hilda as she saw these two pairs of women. The two intruders, having gained the general attention, are very well satisfied, and become more cheerful than ever. They do not go very far. Presently they signal to the conductor to stop and let them out, which he

does. With amblings and prancings they get out, and the car rolls on, while a burst of laughter comes from most of those left in it. The two girls look excitedly at each other, and talk eagerly and earnestly together; they have much to say and many speculations to make on the subject. The young men wink and simper and whisper, with hateful, conscious smirks, peculiar to their kind. Hilda feels sickened and sad; stern and angry at the same time. Horrible, low, and ugly way of viewing vice, and what they think 'life.' But what is that sound, rising above all the rest? Turning quickly in the direction whence it comes, she finds it is nothing less than the mournful woman laughing—loudly, long, and unrestrainedly. She ceases not. Her friend gazes at her in surprise, and the attention of all is concentrated upon her.

'Eh!' she at last ejaculates, 'I must laff. I can't help it. I must laff. I always do laff at them Germans. They are so queer; I never saw anything like them, never. Eh, dear!'

She rocks herself to and fro in an ecstasy of amusement, while the friend looks proudly round as if to say, 'You see what she is after all, when it comes to the point.'

Hilda laughs, too, in spite of herself, and then perceives it is time for her also to get out. She signals to the guard to stop, and is set down. A few steps along a side street bring her to the school. It is home, after all, she feels when she is in her own room, and is answering Letty's eager questions and greetings.

'No, I'm not very tired, Letty, thank you. I'll tell you all about it soon—when I've had some tea. I must have some tea. A pleasant visit? Oh, very! Was it really only yesterday that I left home? I feel as if I had been away a week at least.'

CHAPTER XXXI.

A DISCORD.

THE last days of July, in the same year, had arrived, and between Hilda's flying visit to Great Undermoor and her coming to Godfrey for the holidays, there had been time for 'the wild freshness of morning' to vanish, and give place to deeper, richer, and soberer tints on field and tree, in the sky, and upon the new purpling moorland ridges. Happy they who had fields and woods of their own, or the hills and wastes which belong to

Nature and to God, in and over which to wander, and in which they could drink in the warm summer air; where they could inhale the scents of hay and sweet hedge-roses, the manifold perfumes of the meadow-sweet, sweetbriar, and the honeyed breath of the heather. Happy they who could linger late amidst such surroundings, wandering through woody aisles and catching the faint chirp of the little sleeping birds, whom perhaps their footsteps had disturbed, seeing high overhead, through the interlacing tree-boughs, the solemn darkening grey of the sky, as night came on. Equally happy they who could at twilight pace through the scented lanes, or sit on the dry, delicious heath-tufts, or great grey boulders on the moorside, and watch, in the valleys below, the lights creeping out one by one, and stealing gradually up the hillsides, revealing suddenly the existence of cottage, farm, or hamlet where before all had seemed one uniform brown. Yes, it was well for all who could have these pleasures, and could enjoy them with a quiet mind, or could trace some stream or river up to its source in the distant hills. And woe to them who at that date had to wear out their hearts and their shoe-leather on dusty pavements; whose eyes saw nought but rows of houses; whose ears were filled with the rattle of vehicles and the tramp of many feet, all on business intent, and who, when they could at last go indoors and throw open their windows, could only let into their rooms another edition of what they let out from the same!

Something like these were the thoughts which went actively circling through the brain of Letty Noble on one of those breathless July afternoons, as she sat, hatless and bonnetless, under a tree on the lawn of her new home. The sultry calm and absence of bright sunshine formed her excuse for dispensing with the hat which Godfrey occasionally counselled her to wear. It was a pleasure to cast it aside, and to feel the stream of soft, warm air playing all about her face, and in her hair and head. That was a pleasure; it was a pleasure also to sit with her large, useful apron tied round her waist, and a book in her hand, on the vexed subject of the rearing of fowls, which she had begun to keep, and about which Godfrey, she found, could give her no information. But she would find it out for herself. She did not mean to fail, and she studied the treatise with diligence. She looked decidedly older and less girlish since she had entered upon her cares of office as Godfrey's housekeeper and the mistress of this country place, which had been the dream of her life. She was seventeen and a half, but she looked, and in many respects was, nineteen. She was not given

over to her poultry studies to the exclusion of all else, for she presently produced a little silver watch, and looked at the time.

'Ah, I must go in and see that all is right,' she murmured. 'I should be wretched if Hilda got here thirsty and miserable, and Hannah served her an afternoon tea after her own style. I wonder how many relapses she will have from my style into her own, before the cure is complete at which I am working.'

With that she rose, with a suppressed smile, and went into the house, the door of which stood open. Letty had not even yet lost the sensation of pleasure with which she always took note of this fact: that the door might stand open all day, and no one be any the worse for it.

It will be easily understood that the staff of servants at Little Undermoor was not an expensive one. In fact, it consisted of one respectable country girl: honest and clean, and quite free from the wiles and evil ways of town-bred servants, but free also on her arrival from the most elementary notions of service in this kind of household as distinguished from service in the farmhouse from which she had come. She had taken a great fancy to Letty, which she showed by kindly consenting to 'do her way' when specially ordered, directed, or supervised in the matter, but as a kind of good-natured concession to the young lady's weakness or faddiness, not from any conviction that it was the more excellent way; and when left to herself she instantly, to use Letty's phrase, relapsed into the methods of doing things in which she had been brought up.

What Letty saw now, when she entered the spotlessly clean stone kitchen, was the form of Hannah, 'dressed,' after her morning's work, piling crockery on a large tray in a way which Letty knew.

'Hannah, you are doing it again!' she exclaimed, in a voice of sorrowful reproach.

'Doin' what, Miss? Ye towld me Miss Noble would be here by five, and tea was to be ready.'

'So you were going to spread a white cloth on the dining-room table, put a tea-tray at one end and set white plates and small steel knives round the table?'

'I was, Miss Letty.'

'Well, you know how often I have told you that at this time tea is to be served in the drawing-room, and I have showed you how, Hannah, many times. Now, I will go and put the cloth on the little round table, and do you put the cups and saucers on that small tray, with the cream and sugar, and *no* knives,

and *no* plates, and cut the bread-and-butter. As soon as you hear us come in from the station, make the tea, bring it in, and the bread-and-butter and that tea-cake. We shall be quite ready for it.'

'And won't you give her an egg, nor a dish of preserve, nor nothing?' asked Hannah, exhibiting an ever-fresh surprise at this mean way of doing things.

'And spoil her supper, which she will have at half-past seven?' said Letty, witheringly. 'No, Hannah, I should not give her eggs, or jam either, unless she should ask for them, which is extremely improbable. Now, really,' she added, earnestly, 'what I have told you to do is exactly what Miss Noble will expect to see, and she will be satisfied when she does see it; so try to do as I have told you, Hannah—eh?'

'I will, Miss Letty, I will.' You must just have yer way, but there's six such splendid fresh eggs; grand uns, they are.'

'No fresh eggs, thank you,' said Letty, laughing and going out.

'Why is it so hard for her to do my way?' she speculated. 'I think if I were in her place I should be more adaptable—for one thing, it would save so much wear and tear and trouble. Half-past four. In ten minutes I must set out for the station. I will go into the garden again. . . . . What's that? A visitor? What a bore! Oh, Mr. Barras, good-afternoon!'

For she had discovered who was along the little drive, and advanced to meet him.

'Good-day,' said Giles, smiling, as he looked at her. 'Is your brother at home?'

'He has not come in yet. He seldom does get in much before seven now. I thought you knew.'

'No. What keeps him? Patients, I hope.'

'I cannot say. If not patients, duty. He is so very dutiful, is Godfrey.'

'Now what is the difference in this case between patients and duty?' he asked her, apparently with deep interest. 'Have you time to answer me that question?'

'Time I may have, but not ability, perhaps. I don't know what happens up there. His hours for seeing patients there are in the morning; but he is trying to improve things all round, as he is likely to stay there.'

'You are glad he is staying, then?'

'Ye—es.'

'Doubtful. I thought you were enamoured of the country, and of a country life.'

'So I am. Mr. Barras, will you excuse me? I am going to meet my sister. She is coming by the five o'clock train, and I must get ready.'

'Is it to-day she comes? How time flies!'

'Does it seem such a short time since you saw her, or—what do you mean by that remark?'

He laughed. 'It seems but yesterday that I saw her, and saw some other things, too, at the same time. If you put on your hat and walk to the station, will you allow me to walk there with you?'

'I suppose so. Oh, yes, if you like,' said Letty, suddenly stiffening in look and attitude, as her face lost the open, unembarrassed smile which until now it had worn.

'Pray, my dear young lady, if my company is obnoxious to you do not hesitate to say so. I shall not be offended,' he exclaimed, half amused, half piqued.

Letty's flashes of hauteur and sudden leaps from one mood to another had begun of late to interest him.

'Not in the least,' she answered, in the same tone. 'It makes not the slightest—— Well, I mean if you are going that way I shall be glad of your company, unless you really wish to see Godfrey.'

'I do, but it will keep till another time. Then if you are ready——'

'I will get my hat. Will you come into the drawing-room till I am ready?'

'I will sit on this bench, if you don't object. It is so warm and pleasant.'

With a slight bend of her head, Letty went into the house. Giles seated himself on the bench, and with his walking-stick traced patterns in the gravel. During this process he became so absorbed in thought that he almost forgot where he was. His thoughts must have been of a mingled quality, for now he smiled, now he frowned. Once he lifted his head, and looked through the thick greenery of the trees in the direction of Great Undermoor, then sighed, and in a whisper said, 'No.'

His eyes sank again to the ground. A light step near him roused him. Letty was there, not only hatted but gloved. She looked exceedingly handsome.

'I am ready,' said Letty; and he promptly rose and took his place by her side.

He was conscious of some difference in her whole appearance. Now she astonished him still further by producing a neat, not to say fashionable, light-coloured sunshade, which she

opened, and with easy grace laid over her shoulder. They went towards the gates. For the first time he observed that she was 'more than common tall,' and that her stature was not due to either a high hat or high-heeled shoes, neither of which abominations she affected. She was slight but not thin; she carried her height, he now observed, with ease and grace. It was a simple fact that he had never hitherto seen her thus dressed, neatly and trimly, for going abroad outside her own garden. He had seen her in her working apron, running about the garden, or in the evening, perhaps, for a few minutes, as often as not in the garden again, or reading in the deep rocking chair in the drawing-room, with an ancient broad hat cast on the floor beside her. He felt he had been a little careless in offering his company to the station in so off hand a manner, as if she had been a mere school-girl. But it was done. She had, after all, accepted the escort, and he was very well satisfied with the arrangement. They walked on; he began to talk to her, and quite unconsciously to use a more ceremonious tone.

By-and-by they arrived at the point where the two paths met; one turning off to the Great Undermoor garden, through which lay the nearest way to the station, the second to the high-road, also going to the station a roundabout and somewhat dusty highway. Letty made for the gate leading to the last of these.

'Are you not going this way?' he asked in surprise, pointing to the other path.

'No,' was the only response.

'It is so much the shorter and pleasanter.'

'It is a private road.'

'But' (he was just going to say 'my dear child,' only something in Letty's expression restrained him) 'you are free to use it as if it were your own, I know.'

'Yes, I know, too. But I never do use it.'

'What would Miss Blundell say if she knew you were so ceremonious?'

'I don't—care—what—Miss Blundell would say,' said Letty, with tightening lips. 'I suppose I may go the way I like the best?'

'Pardon me,' was all Giles found to say, suddenly deeply interested.

Unperceived he stole a glance at her, as she passed out at the gate he held open for her. She was, if possible, more erect than before. Her beautiful dark head was uplifted high, the bright colour seemed to have faded from her face, leaving a paleness under the bronze. Her lips were pressed a little

tightly together. She stepped out with a certain majesty, and her eyes sparkled with no friendly expression.

The gate had scarcely closed behind them, and they had resumed their walk on the footpath, Giles still surprised and wondering, when wheels behind them slackened their pace. Giles turning, perceived that it was Alizon driving her own cart. She pulled up.

'Good-afternoon?' she cried, cordially. 'What brings you out on this road, at this time?'

'Good-day!' responded Giles, and, feeling a little piquant amusement, he replied for the silent Letty; 'Miss Noble is going to meet her sister, and I am walking with her as far as the station.'

As he had fully expected and intended, Alizon at once cried:

'Going to the station! And what in the name of wonder brings you round this way?'

'You must ask Miss Noble. I followed her wishes, of course.'

Alizon looked from one to the other of them, her keen face wearing a look of surprise. She fixed her eyes inquiringly upon Letty.

'I prefer this road,' was all the girl would say, in a curt tone, 'and I must not stand talking or I shall be late. Mr. Barras, if you are not ready to come on I will say good-afternoon.'

She was stiffer than ever in aspect and attitude.

'Look here,' said Alizon. 'Since you have such unaccountable taste as to prefer this road, get in here with me. I'll have you at the station in five minutes.

'No, thank you!' with great distinctness and dignity, 'I prefer to walk. Then, Mr. Barras——'

This time she merely looked at him.

'I am at your orders. Good-afternoon, Alizon. There is not too much time, really. I'll see you later, or Peregrine.'

He lifted his hat. Letty made a slight, majestic kind of bow. They went on. For a moment yet the cart stood still. They had not gone many yards, when they heard the rush of its wheels behind them. In the flash of an eye it had passed them, and was whirling like lightning along the road in front of them, its driver in an uncompromisingly business-like attitude. She gave them not a glance, and all they received from her was a great cloud of white dust which completely enveloped them. When it subsided, she was out of sight.

Giles was interested, rather concerned, and, for him, extremely curious to know what it all meant.

'Miss Noble, pardon me, do you dislike Miss Blundell?'

'I hate her,' was the succinct reply.

'Hate her! For heaven's sake, why?'

'Oh, nothing.'

'There must be some reason to make you *think* you hate her.'

'Must there?' Letty was smiling disagreeably.

'Well, if you think so, I'll give you one. She is an autocrat. No one must do or think anything but what she pleases. The other day I was in the garden, with a basket and a pair of scissors. I was clipping off old and bad roses, and I was cutting a few fresh ones for the house. I was in heaven. She walked into the garden. She wanted Godfrey for something or other. "Good-morning, child. What are you doing? Oh, I'll do that for you. I know all about roses."'

'So she does,' said Giles, with profound interest.

'She took the scissors out of my hand, and did my work splendidly, I daresay. She has had roses to cut all her life. It was the first time I ever, in all mine, had had a rose to cut of my own, as it were, and I was in paradise, as I told you. She cut the roses, and thought she was being kind, because she could do it quicker and better than I could. I said nothing—but I hate her.'

Her voice trembled. There was a pause. At last Giles said, very gravely:

'It was—wanting in tact on her part, certainly; but do you suppose I believe that is why you hate her?'

'I don't know what you believe.'

'Not that, certainly. And you don't mean me to.'

She laughed, not gaily. 'You said there must be a reason, so I have to give you one. I could have cried—I know that. Taking my roses from me!'

'Won't you tell me the real reason?' said Giles, as persuasively as he knew how, and feeling a strong and unaccountable anxiety to get to the bottom of it.

He looked at her as he spoke, and met her eyes. They were sad; they were full of pain and unease.

'No,' she said, 'I cannot tell you. I should have to feel very bad before I could tell any one. But I do hate her. I have reason to hate her, and it hurts to hate people? Why do we have to hate people? Why are the best of things always poisoned by some horrid drawback?'

She clenched her teeth, as he could see, and her colour rose.

'I am concerned about this,' he said, and he saw that they

were very near the station. 'I have known Miss Blundell so much longer and so much better than you have. I know her for what she is. She would never consciously do you a wrong. And, if she has in any way unconsciously vexed or offended you, it is surely not fair to visit it on her by hatred.'

'I told you I could not tell you why it was,' said Letty, with the same pained, constrained look. 'Do not let us talk about it. Here we are at the station. I am not going to meet Hilda with a dismal face. Good-bye!'

She held out her hand. It was so obvious that she did not wish for his company for an instant longer, that he promptly bade her adieu, hoping her sister would arrive safely and well. She went into the station, and Giles decided to return to Great Undermoor and ask to see Peregrine.

'I'm sorry,' was his thought, as he turned in the direction of the great house. 'What can it all mean? That girl has character and individuality. I like her—proud little monkey! But I hope she will not quarrel with Alizon Blundell. Folly—and worse than folly! One frown from Alizon's brow, one movement of her hand when she in her haste says, "All men are liars," or "All women are abject, mean-spirited fools," and the Noble *ménage* would be swept away with greater speed than it was collected together; and that would be a pity—quite as much a pity for the great house as for the small one. 'Twould be a bad business. . . . And I wonder if she has heard anything more about that unlucky little goose at Kirkfence.' He reflected profoundly for a time, and then, with a nod of his head—'That would be a worse! Heaven stave it off!'

He went in at the lodge gate, and up the drive.

CHAPTER XXXII.

GILES REBELS.

A WEEK later Giles was again at Great Undermoor, this time in the evening. He found a party assembled out of doors. There were Alizon and Hilda, Peregrine, Godfrey Noble, and Harold Ashby. When Giles went into the garden Alizon and Hilda were in converse, seated on a rug on the grass. The three young men were pacing about a walk not far off. Dinner was over. It was after nine o'clock, and the steady brilliance of the light had begun to be sobered down. The air was dry,

warm, and delicious, as it is on only a few favoured night throughout the year.

Giles, bending down to shake hands with the two ladies, had taken a rapid survey of the company, and his mental comment was:

'Where's the little girl?'

Not there. That was very evident. He had thought of her a good many times since that walk from the station, and he thought of her now with redoubled interest.

'Your sister is not here?' he said, inquiringly, to Hilda.

'No, she would not come. Letty is very stay-at-home,' said Hilda, unconscious of any hidden meaning in this question.

Giles caught sight of Alizon's face just then. It was turned a little aside from Hilda, and it wore a kind of smile. He felt angry. Of course it was not the first time he had felt angry with her. It was not to-night that he discovered her to be exasperating, perverse, and inconsiderate. But, heretofore, these faults of hers had affected him personally and directly. He was strong, he was simple, and he was generous. He had always forgiven her these sins against himself, knowing, deep down in his heart, that they did not in the least measure her real regard for him. But in this case, reading it all by the light of his conversation with Letty of a week ago, he discovered something else, and said within himself that it was wicked on her part thus to abuse her power. If Hilda and Godfrey had been the only persons in question, and she chose to fascinate them and make them in love with her, it mattered nothing; but she had no right, through her influence over them, to inflict pain on another, to whom they were all in all. For something of the truth had begun to dawn on Giles's mind. Dangerous gift, for either man or woman—this one of witchery—of power to charm and fascinate, along with a disposition like that of Alizon Blundell! This all passed rapidly through his mind after he had caught that smile on her face. He said nothing to her then, but asked Hilda if she was enjoying her holiday. She answered yes, and smiled, but he was not altogether convinced by her assent.

At that moment the others came up. They sat down, all three, on a bench just opposite the young women, and Giles alone was left standing. He saw every look and every gesture of them all, and whether his senses were sharpened by some new emotion, or whether it was a particularly happy moment in which to make observations, these looks and gestures appeared to him significant.

'Tired of walking?' said Alizon; and, though she looked at all three of them, the question was addressed to Peregrine.

'Oh, Lord, yes!' answered he; 'and of a great many other things, too.'

There was not a pleasant expression on his face, and he went on:

'Look here, Alizon, I was saying the other day to you that I should like to have some kind of an—amusement, shall we say? And now I have quite decided it shall be a dance. I'm tired of playing the hermit, and you will have forgotten soon how to play the hostess unless you have a little practice.'

A dead pause and silence followed this announcement. Every one present knew Peregrine's circumstances, every one present knew that in those circumstances he had no business to talk of giving dances, and every one present had nothing to say on the subject.

'From the silence of all present,' went on the young man, 'I gather that my proposition meets with universal favour. Dinners are stiff. I've thought it well over. I don't want a lot of old fogeys. Or, for the matter of that, we could give them a feed afterwards, to propitiate them. A dance is the sort of thing one wants now. All that remains is for you to say when. How long invitations will you send out?'

Another pause. Then Alizon, lightly rising to her feet, gave her hand to Hilda to help her to do the same, before she replied to her brother:

'It is not so easily settled as all that. Many things have to be considered before such a thing can be arranged. No—it is impossible to decide it in that offhand manner.'

An unpleasant expression came over Peregrine's face. Alizon did not succeed in looking light-hearted. There was silence, till at last Peregrine, with a smile, said to Hilda:

'Let me suggest that we go into the house. I begin to feel a little chilly. I don't know what you think.'

He offered her his arm, and after a moment's hesitation she took it, and they walked away. Alizon, dropping behind the others, said to Giles, mockingly:

'I invited the child up there to come down with the rest of them, but she would not. We don't find favour in her eyes. If you feel concerned about her, won't you go and try to persuade her to change her mind?'

Her look was a mixture of amusement and curiosity. It struck Giles that the amusement partook of contemptuousness, and it stung him. When we are emerging from any bondage,

or enchantment, or illusion, it is the very thing that before we found so fascinating which now most disgusts us. Giles had long been in bondage. Many things combined to determine this as the time when he should, so to speak, be released. Amongst them was distinctly this attitude of Alizon towards Letty, which he thought unworthy of her. He replied at once:

'Indeed, I think I could not do better than take your advice. The girl is a bright, a companionable, and an intelligent girl, whose capabilities are more on a level with my own than her sister's. We have many things in common, I find.'

'Goes without saying, if she be all you describe,' was the provoking reply. 'For my part, I always feel annoyed with people who get maggots in their heads, and make imaginary grievances. Best to leave them alone till they come to their senses.'

'*Is* her grievance altogether imaginary?' he asked, gravely. 'I shall go and see if she will talk to me for half an hour, at any rate.'

He raised his head, looked very grave, and walked away, leaving Alizon to go alone towards the house with a constrained smile on her lips. She shrugged her shoulders as she went indoors.

'What a nuisance people's tiresome relations are!'

They finished the evening in the library. Giles did not return. Only Alizon knew where he had gone, and when some one asked vaguely where he was and what he had come for if he did not mean to stay, she replied carelessly that he had bethought himself of an errand, and nothing would satisfy him but to go at once and do it.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

BROTHER AND SISTER.

After the guests had gone, the brother and sister, who had accompanied them to the door, turned into the house again. It was about half-past ten, and it was Peregrine's usual habit to go to his own rooms about that time, whether he went to bed or not. He often could not sleep, and would while away several hours in reading, smoking, or sometimes in doing nothing at all. Alizon seldom or never kept him company at such times. Deep down in the heart of each was the know-

ledge that though their kinship was near, and though circumstances made it in every way good that they should be together, yet that they were not really suited to one another. There was no innate sympathy, and their companionship was outward, not inward.

To-night, however, Peregrine returned to the library, where they had been sitting.

The urbane smile with which he had dismissed his guests had vanished. The same sullen, exasperated look was on his face that it had worn when he had said he was tired of walking about, 'and of lots of other things besides.' He thrust his hands into his pockets and began to pace about. Alizon stood beside a table for a moment.

'Are you going, Peregrine? Because I always put out the lamps before I go upstairs.'

'You are in a deuce of a hurry to go,' he said, ill-temperedly, and his back was still towards her as he walked in the direction of one of the windows.

Quick as lightning a change crossed her face. Its haggard, sharp look came over it. She let the lamp alone, and seated herself. It was coming, she knew, the instant she heard that tone. Something disagreeable was coming. Instinctively she braced herself up to meet it.

'Oh, you usually go now. How was I to know?'

'Look here, Alizon' (he had now turned in his promenade, and was facing her), 'what did you mean by setting me down in that way before all those people?'

'Setting you down? Nonsense! What could I say, or do?'

'You could have said "All right," and looked pleasant as you did so,' he retorted, almost savagely. 'You forget, sometimes—I give you so little trouble—that I'm not in reality the child I seem to be.'

She smiled a little. Her head was dropping forward, her hands clasped before her. She took no heed of the last part of his words, but replied to the first:

'To say "All right," and look pleasant, Peregrine, were just the two things I could not do, because it would not have been right. It would have been very wrong, and you know it.'

She omitted to taunt him with his moral cowardice in springing the subject upon her 'before all those people:' giving her a few seconds of acute anguish before she could frame a reply of the kind least calculated to wound him. Did he suppose she would make any other reply than that she had made? She could have groaned to think that though he had

known her so long, had seen what her daily and hourly practice was, he yet still thought that subterfuges, evasions, or round-about ways would lead her astray where her own stern sense of right and duty pointed the way.

'Be hanged if I know anything of the kind,' he said, petulantly. 'I can tell you I mean this thing, if I never meant anything in my life before. I've been thinking about it all. It is monstrous and ridiculous that we alone of all our neighbours should be shut up in this preposterous, enchanted castle sort of a life. A bad illness need not make one into a misanthrope. There's no reason why we should not entertain sometimes. Since I've had Noble looking after me, I feel ever so much better. I'm grateful to him,' said Peregrine, in a sudden glow of enthusiasm. 'If it were for nothing else but to show that, and to give a bit of amusement to him and his sisters, I should wish to do something. I should have thought that, since you are so thick with Hilda Noble, you would have wished something of the kind, too.'

'Strange arguments, Peregrine. You forget continually that the Nobles are in the deepest mourning. If they were to come to a ball of our giving it would be to oblige us, and not because they wanted to do it. But that has nothing to do with the main argument. If all were straight and as it should be, do you suppose I would stand in the way of your ball, if you wish to give one?'

'And pray, why should it be wrong! I don't propose to go into debt over it, or——'

'You know why it is wrong,' she said, venturing on a bold stroke, and with her heart thickly beating all the time—for the one thing before which this strong woman quailed, even in anticipation, was the sight of her brother, prostrated and speechless, afraid to breathe, unable to move, under one of his heart attacks. The mere recollection of them always made her shudder.

She, whose perfect health knew no flaw, turned sick and faint at the sight of his suffering; and the recovery, the slow coming back to breath and speech again, and the subsequent feebleness, were almost worse to her than the spasm itself. But, from long experience, she knew that it was impossible to say exactly what situation might bring on a fit of illness. Sometimes a trivial thing, or perhaps nothing traceable, would suffice to do it; on the other hand, she had known a serious scene to leave him undisturbed. Therefore, with a kind of desperate resolve, she spoke plainly now.

'It would be wrong, because your wife is living apart from you at Kirkfence, with your children, and every one knows it. If she lived away from you because of any sin on her part, it would alter the case entirely. But she doesn't——'

'No sin! No fault!' ejaculated Peregrine, passionately. 'Is it no sin that she flies into a passion with me!'

'Her sin and her fault were that after a time she failed to please you. She did not change. It was your eyes that were opened. You know that in your worst anger and disgust you did not think of bringing the matter into a court of law. She was faithful to you. She would have pleased you if she had known how. Slander personified could not have brought a charge against her. If you had been a poor man you could not have disposed of her as you have done. And every one knows it. Every one knows that things are as they are because you will not do what is right. And I say that since you have doomed her to a life of seclusion—to a false position—a half-existence of discontent and fretfulness, and the constant feeling that she is injured, which might sour a much stronger character than poor Nelly's—since you have done this, it is shameful to think of flaunting a ball in her face, at which she has just as much right to be present as any one else whom you could ask. It means that you insult her. If she were to hear of it—and how should she not hear of it?—she would have every right to feel outraged, and—what you delight in so much—to come over and make a row about it. That's why it would be wrong. The only way in which you can give a shred of respectability to your position is by keeping as quiet and as much out of every thing as you force her to do.'

Peregrine had gone very white, but his eyes looked dangerous.

'A pretty lecture!' he said. 'I hope you have enjoyed delivering it. It may be all very real to you, but to me' (he smiled unpleasantly) 'it's just so much bosh. Look here.' He paused, and she raised her eyes to look at him. He was standing erect, his tall, graceful shape, in its correct evening dress, showing out strongly against the background of yellow lamplight. She knew the expression on his face. She tapped her fingers on the arm of her chair. He went on politely: 'I give you a good lot of your own way, you know, Alizon, because it isn't worth while disputing about most of your fads; but you must remember it is on sufferance after all that you do what you do here. We are in my house. My illness is not an illness of the mind, though I daresay in this case you might

think it desirable to be able to make out that it was—you call every one crazy who disagrees with you.' (She winced, but did not speak.) 'But it isn't. I know what I am doing, and I know what I can do. I mean to have this party. If you choose to show your good sense, of which you have abundance after all, and fall in with my wishes, you know what you have to do—you will take the hostess's part and the hostess's authority. I don't wish to dispute a point of that with you. If not, why then, my dear girl, you can either betake yourself in solitary state to your own rooms, or go away somewhere till it is over, and I will arrange the whole affair. But I mean to have it; so now all you have to do is to make your decision, and tell me what it is. See?'

He spoke with outward pleasantness, and smiled as he spoke. Alizon realised that this time he had fairly taken the bit between his teeth, and that she must let him go until he chose to stop of his own accord. It was the kind of thing she had often dimly dreaded, but which, desponding though she had ever been about Peregrine's principles, she had always tried to put out of her thoughts as too bad to happen. Here it was, and it must be faced.

She must face it, or run away from it—give up the whole thing, and leave them to it, as she had so often wondered at herself for not having done before. After all, what was there to keep her there? She was perfectly independent of Peregrine as regards means, she was perfectly free to say, 'This goes beyond what I will bear; I wash my hands of it and of you.' Peregrine might pretend to be satisfied, and to take her at her word if she said such a thing, but none knew better than he, she told herself, how miserable, how disorganised would be his whole existence, if deprived of her support.

These and other considerations passed with the speed of lightning through her mind as she sat motionless in her easy-chair, Peregrine facing her after he had spoken. It was, in its way, a supreme moment for her. It was surely a great question of right and wrong. But the right and the wrong on each side were so mingled, so intertwined with one another, that there seemed no separating them. Did it, then, resolve itself into a question of expediency? She had often inveighed against the expediency policy, holding that right was right, and wrong, wrong. But, when she came to think now, it seemed as if perhaps the lesser injury would be done by her yielding. If she held out, ruin was inevitable, so it seemed to her. If she yielded, it was all very bad and horrible, but it

was not so great a calamity as to break loose from him and leave him to himself and his fate. So she argued. She very distinctly felt herself to be her brother's keeper in this matter. Like many another powerful and self-reliant soul, she made the mistake of thinking that it all depended upon her; a natural error when for a long time so much had, or had seemed to depend upon her. Finally came the still small voice of the most subtly deceiving of all her thoughts in the matter:

'You undertook to stand by him and take him in hand. Was it only while he did right? Or did it mean for good and for evil—both?'

She looked up at him at last, a peculiar expression in her eyes.

'Well?' he asked.

'You are the same as ever, Peregrine, I perceive. I shall not argue with you. This goes against my inmost principles. I hate it, and I am certain it is wrong. But I believe that if I were to take you at your word, and leave you to it—and it would not be for a week or a month, mind, but for ever if I did it—I believe if I did that, I should perhaps do something that was still more wrong. Therefore, you may count on me to be present, if you will have this horrible festivity. I will receive your guests and be civil to them. You may picture for yourself with how little pleasure—but I will do it.'

'Ah! I thought you'd see reason, somehow,' said Peregrine, carelessly, but with a slight smile, and a ring of triumph in his voice.

She shook her head. His triumph did not sting her. Her sadness was too deep.

'I see unreason and wrong on every side,' she said.

'Pooh! With you it takes so little to condemn a fellow to perpetual penance and discipline. Very well, that is settled. I shall go; good-night!'

For almost the first time in her life she made no answer to his 'good-night.' Peregrine sauntered out, leaving her there. Outside, in the hall, he began to look less careless, frowned a little, and said to himself, as he pulled his moustache:

'Rough on her, after all. But I could not give it up. Too absurd! She will be all right when it is over.'

CHAPTER XXXIV.

LETTY SPEAKS.

GILES had done exactly as he had said he should when he left Alizon looking at him—mockingly, as he could not help seeing. That is, he had taken his way to Little Undermoor, and not finding Letty in the garden, as he had fully expected to do, had rung the bell and asked if she was at home.

She was, replied the maid, and she ushered him into the drawing-room, which, after the light outside, was almost dark, and at first he did not see whether Letty was in the room or not. At last he discovered her, leaning out of a side window, which looked into a small enclosure spread with grass, and surrounded by trees. At first she did not turn; then he spoke her name; she started, raised herself, and looked round. There was a pallor on her bright young face, and a drawn, constrained look about her lips, which pained Giles. The fact was he had suddenly begun to think about her. The thinking had begun the other day, when he had walked down to the station with her, and, as is the manner of such thinking, had continued pretty steadily ever since. Therefore he noted all the signs of her appearance—the pallor, the tightened lips, the look of greater age and experience, which had suddenly come over her.

'Mr. Barras!' said she, coming forward. Then, in a bitter tone (for the young creature was feeling her bitterness too keenly to be able to conceal it), 'you have come to the wrong place. All the company is down at the great house. There's no one here but me.'

'Well, I have been at the great house, too, and I missed you, and asked where you were. I was told you had refused the invitation, and was recommended to come and try to get you to reconsider your decision. Won't you change your mind, and go back there with me?'

'I am sorry you took so much trouble. It is quite useless, for I am not going there.'

She was still standing, so of course he could not seat himself. He looked at her—at the ruffled white brow, the gloomy eyes and vexed mouth, and somehow, all at once, it was to Giles as if he felt more peace and pleasure in the presence of this mutinous maiden than for a long time he had experienced. He did not wish her to go back with him to Great Under-

moor. He did not wish to go there himself; it was a bare faced baseless fabrication on his part. Why should her mortification and annoyance be of any consequence to him? He did not reason about it, but he felt very desirous to find out all about it; so he said:

'I see your resolution is fixed. Well, to tell the truth, I did not find them a very interesting party; or, rather, perhaps they did not find me very interesting, for I felt as if I were not exactly wanted there. They had been together all the evening, and were complete in themselves, so to speak. I daresay you know the feeling,' pursued Giles, with a deep policy and finesse which amazed himself when afterwards he came to think of it.

'Oh, I know that feeling very well, especially since I came here,' replied Letty, still bitterly. 'It is the feeling I have myself with regard to that company. Sit down, Mr. Barras, if you like—unless you promised to go back, with or without me. I will light the candles. One feels that the longest day passed some time ago, doesn't one?'

'Yes, indeed!' he assented, promptly, as he took the chair she pointed to, while she lighted two candles and placed them on a small table. She seated herself in an easy-chair beside it.

'We are the outcasts, evidently,' remarked Giles; and as he spoke a wonder did come over him as to the reason of it all.

He had never before felt unwelcome at Great Undermoor; though he might have gone at all sorts of times and found his friends in all kinds of humours, he had always felt that he did not intrude, and the interest excited by the constant uncertainty as to how Alizon would receive him, on what points she would contradict him, which of his pet theories or optimistic views of things she would remorselessly upset, had kept him constant, and had given an unflagging zest to the intercourse. Her perversity, her contradictoriness, her pooh-poohing of his views had been easy to bear, had added to the fascination which she had exercised over him. But to-night he had thought to detect in her voice and glance something like contempt—good-humoured, perhaps, but complete. He was sweet-tempered, but that stung him; and he was certain, too, that she had taken pleasure in vexing Letty Noble by showing her the attraction her company had for the brother and sister who were all in all to the girl. That angered him. Now that he saw Letty he had another feeling as well, and all these influences combined to make him desirous of hearing the young girl's view of the situation which she evidently disliked so much.

'Are we?' said Letty, drearily. 'I don't much care what I am. I only know that all my life I have been happy, and have never felt any ill-will to any one, even when I thought I was being moulded into a "colleague" to teach at the High School; even when everything around me was so discouraging it never discouraged me. I despised crying and low spirits. I always had plenty to do, and never thought of such things. And now, do you know, when I am in this place, which I expected would be like Paradise to me—I assure you, when I heard I was coming to live with Godfrey in the country I thought my last wish had been accomplished, and before it came off I used to pray at night that I might not die before I had tried it, for a week at any rate; so you see that it was not that I was unwilling to come, was it?'

She leaned forward; looked intently at him in the deep earnestness of her explanation, as if to make sure that he took it in.

'No, it could not have been that,' said Giles; and he was surprised to hear a slightly husky sound in his own voice.

'No, it was not that. Well, even before I came here—before I left Hilda, you know—I found she was in some way different after her visit here. She was not unkind; you could not call it unkindness. But she was so curious and preoccupied. I hardly know what it was. I didn't think very much of it. I looked forward to its being all right when I got here. Godfrey and I were always good friends. I came. I was prepared to find everything perfect. I cannot say that a single thing is wrong. It is all very much as I expected it would be, in many ways. Of course we are very poor, but not poorer than we have been. Of course I haven't the life of an idle fine lady. I never had the slightest wish for it. But the dreadful fact remains, that where I was sure I should be so happy, so settled, so exactly in the right place, I am—*miserable!*'

Letty spoke with a fierce *abandon* and energy, and looked at him with a pair of angry dark eyes whose expression thrilled him.

'Miserable is rather a strong word,' was all he could find to say.

'Is it? It is just what I feel, at any rate. Perhaps you don't care to hear any more of my scolding. Perhaps I had better not tell you why.'

'Oh, pray do, if you don't mind. You may be sure it will go no further. And then, when people are miserable, it only

makes it ten times worse when they keep it to themselves,' he said, and again rejoiced inwardly at his own astuteness.

Letty was too absorbed in her subject not to be thankful to find some one who would listen to the sound of her mourning.

'I did declare to myself that I would bury it in my own heart—lock it up, and throw the key away,' she said; and Giles did not feel in the least inclined to smile over the magniloquence of the expression. 'But such resolutions are more easily made than kept. I could not imagine for ever so long why I felt so wretched and dissatisfied. But I have found it out now.'

'And what is it?'

'It is that those people down there, the Blundells, have stolen away my brother and sister from me. They are no longer the same. We were all one family before; united through and through. There was nothing wrong amongst us. Each was interested in the affairs of all the others. Now they are perfectly indifferent. They are living each in a world of their own. They don't care. They like to keep these worlds to themselves, and not talk about them, and I am outside. I thought at first I could be satisfied with the life outside until they came right again,' Letty said, speaking of them as if they had been watches or some other machines out of order. 'So I did all I could. I worked in the garden. I studied fowls, and tried to think they were quite as interesting as Godfrey and Hilda used to be. I took long walks with a botany book in my hand. That made it worse. I used to do botany with Godfrey, but I'm sure he doesn't care for botany now. It was all of no use. As soon as I got back to the house the cloud fell again between us, and it makes me miserable, as I told you.'

'And you attribute it to the influence of the Blundells?' he said, gravely and rather incredulously.

'I don't attribute it. I am absolutely certain of it. Of course they are not like ordinary people. I can see that Miss Blundell can make herself charming when she pleases, and to whom she pleases. She has that way of taking possession of people, and keeping them if she wants them, and for just as long as she wants them, whether she has any right to them or not. She has taken possession of Hilda in that way. And Godfrey——' she stopped.

She could not, as she thought, betray Godfrey, even in the midst of her pain.

'And Godfrey——' repeated Giles, in a constrained tone.

'I ought not to say what I can see. Perhaps other people

can see it, too. It is so. She knows it, and I think it is shameful in her to let him stay near her, and see her every day, and go in and out as he does, and as she makes him do, when she never means to have anything to do with him.'

Giles was silent from sheer excess of astonishment. Did the child by any chance suppose that there could ever have been 'anything to do' between her brother Godfrey and Alizon Blundell? Then he inwardly shrugged his shoulders. After all, what was Godfrey Noble but flesh and blood, full of susceptibilities which none knew better than Alizon how to play upon—how to soothe, to irritate, to inspire with love and reverence, or to inflame with passion, just as she chose? Had she not before now played upon his own feelings, from one end of the scale to the other, and how should Godfrey escape? Letty's next remark, however, gave him yet more disagreeable food for thought.

'As for him—Mr. Blundell,' she said, and paused, 'I hate him.'

'I would so much rather you did not say so to me.'

'I believe I would say it to himself if I got the chance, and was really roused,' said Letty, with flashing eyes. 'He doesn't care for anything except to amuse himself, and he is amusing himself now, as well as he can, with my sister Hilda.'

'You should not say such things of your sister, whatever you may think of him,' said Giles, quickly. 'I scarcely know her, but she does not strike me as being the person to lend herself to anything of the kind.'

'I said nothing against her. If she is drawn into it, it is because she believes in him. She does not see what he is. She is too true and good to imagine how poor and contemptible he is, because he has interested her in him, and made her sorry for him, and she forgets everything else. But do you suppose Miss Blundell would think of that if she came to know of it? Not she! She would forget that Hilda is not his sister; she would forget that she is just thrusting him into her company every day as much as she can, and what she now considers so kind and good she would twist just the other way if she got angry about it. I am sure she can be unjust—horribly unjust. You don't say a word. I expect you think I am a maniac, or a horrid, jealous creature who cannot bear not to be first. It is not that. I think something bad will come of it all. I wish Godfrey would leave this house and go where he could be independent. It would not be so nice, but it would be much more right and suitable.'

She concluded with a profound sigh. Giles felt that it was a great sacrifice she was prepared to make, to leave Little Undermoor and go to what she would have called a 'poky little house in a row,' in the interests of right and honesty. While he considered that she took a morbid and exaggerated view of the state of affairs, he was charmed with her right feeling and her unperverted desire to do what was right, not what was pleasant.

'I'm awfully sorry,' he said at last. 'I think you have exaggerated it. You are naturally disappointed to find your brother and sister can have absorbing friendships into which you do not enter. As for any evil designs on the part of Mr. and Miss Blundell, I am sure you may make your mind easy on the subject. I don't think you allow for the troubles they have to contend with, and the pleasure they experience in finding friends like your brother and sister. For that matter, perhaps if you are patient,' continued Giles, with ever-increasing astonishment at the brilliant ideas which came flocking into his mind, 'perhaps you may find a friendship of your own. It is unnatural to have no friends outside your immediate family, and unhealthy too. Depend upon it, when you have been here a little longer and got to know more people, things will seem quite different.'

'I don't think any outside friends could make up to me for the loss of my brother and sister.'

'But I do not think you have lost them. I think, as I said, that you exaggerate. Do you see many people outside?'

'No. There is an American lady who thinks a great deal of Godfrey—Mrs. Van Bibber. She came to call upon me, and offered to take me for drives. But I like walking better than drives. And the vicar's wife has been, and one or two others. They are very kind, I know.'

'I should like you to see my house,' said Giles; and wondered why he felt so awkward as he made this extremely simple announcement. 'Will you come, some day, with your brother and sister?'

'Oh, thank you. I know where your house is,' said Letty, naïvely. 'I have been past the gates several times in some of my long walks.'

'Past the gates. If I had only known! What pleasure it would have given me if——' he suddenly stopped.

He supposed he could scarcely have invited her to come in and have tea without a chaperon, and this reflection gave rise to many others.

'Well, it is getting late,' he said, suddenly, 'I must go. I am going to walk home.'

'Are you? Delightful! I will go to the door with you. It is now quite dark. . . . Good-night, Mr. Barras.'

'Good-night! Do not give way to low spirits and dark forebodings. I should hate to think of your doing that.'

'Should you? Well, I am sure I will do my best to keep out of them. By the way, have you a poultry-yard at your house?'

'Of course!' cried Giles, visibly brightening. 'Of course I have. The day you come I will show you everything in it, and the man who tends it shall explain all about it to you, if you like.'

'Oh, thank you. I really want to learn. I intend to make money by my poultry, and in time I shall do so, but so far I have only spent it.'

With a laugh more like her usual one, Letty gave him a final nod of the head, and went into the house. It was after ten o'clock. Giles, striding homewards along the dark road, under the edge of the mysterious rustling wood, was occupied in thinking of Letty and of their recent conversation.

'If she should by any chance be right!' he speculated. 'Whew! What a kettle of fish—not to say what a seething cauldron of a row there would be! I hope she is wrong. . . . She is the most delightful creature I have seen for a long time. Regards me quite as a father, evidently, or she would never have told me all that rigmarole. She is quite bound up in her brother and sister. I'll not make a fool of myself. She has a mighty strong sense of the ridiculous: quite enough to laugh me to death if I. . . . I wonder, though! Nearly eighteen—a child—and I forty! Too absurd! I'll send her down a pair of those Brahmas which Marcet said were laying so well.'

With which heroic resolution he reached his own gate and went in.

CHAPTER XXXV.

BY THE FISHPOND.

A FEW days later, soon after breakfast and before Godfrey had gone up to Moorside, the sisters and brother were together in the dining-room, when Alizon Blundell walked in.

'Good-morning,' she said to them all. 'Hilda, I've come on an errand to you. I have to go to Kirkfence by the twelve

o'clock train, on business—delightful business. Amongst other things, I'm going to buy the invitation cards for this ball, and send them out to-night or to-morrow. But that is quite a side question. What I really came to say is, that I shall not be able to get home before evening—till after tea at any rate, and I want to know if, supposing Peregrine were to come up here this afternoon, you'll sacrifice yourself, and entertain him? I know he means to come. I hope it won't bore you?'

'Not in the least,' began Hilda at once, when Godfrey said: 'If Hilda can't entertain him, I will.'

'There is nothing in the world to prevent one from doing so,' said Hilda, decisively. 'I shall be at home all afternoon, and very glad to see him.'

'Wasn't there a tea-party or something at the Walshes?' began Godfrey.

'Don't be disagreeable, throwing obstacles in my way,' Alizon told him. 'You are a good soul, Hilda. I knew you'd do this for me. So that is all right. I shall go away with an easy mind.'

'You may,' said Hilda, laughing a little.

The others were silent. Alizon turned over the leaves of a book which lay on the table, and continued to grumble over the necessity of having to go to Kirkfence. No one existed with eyes keener than hers when she was on her guard, or felt any need for observing her company. It would have required a great genius in the art of deception to have taken her in when she did not choose to be taken in. On the other hand, when once she had given her confidence, no one more darkly blind, deaf, and obtuse ever lived. It would have taken a moral earthquake to make her even suspect anything wrong, anything not straightforward, amongst those whom she had set up on the pedestal of her esteem.

'I can't stay,' she said, suddenly. 'Come with me to the gate, Hilda. I have something to say to you.'

They went out together, and towards the gate. Alizon drew from her pocket a letter, which she handed to her friend.

'Read that, and you'll know why I have to go to Kirkfence.'

She put a letter into Hilda's hand. It was a single sheet of common white note-paper, without date or address, and written on one side only. All that it said was:

'You had better pay another call at 4, Addersley Park. You will find that some strange things have been going on while Miss S. is away.'

'What does it mean? Don't you know who has written it?' asked Hilda.

'Not I! An anonymous friend, I suppose. There's nothing surprising in anonymous letters in such a case as that. It does not matter who has written it. What it means, I imagine, is, if there be any truth in it, that my sister-in-law is bored to death, and is getting more and more dissatisfied and unmanageable. She has taken advantage of Miss Smith's absence to amuse herself as well as she can—with a flirtation, no doubt. What else can one suppose? It is hard lines on her. A man is the plaything which always and under any circumstances is sure to content her, and for such as her there is always one ready to be her plaything.'

'Very unpleasant.'

'Very. The more so because I know she is exasperated, and this wretched ball will exasperate her still more. How I hate it! She will feel herself justified in doing almost anything. Of course this letter may be purely spiteful. But I must know, if possible, how much truth there is in it. I cannot summon Miss Smith back in the midst of her holiday. Heaven knows she has earned it hardly enough. I must go and see Nelly. Perhaps it will frighten her a little. It is so delightful to feel that you can frighten people, isn't it? Even though you may be able to do nothing with them by gentle means,' said Alizon, bitterly.

'Oh, don't look at it in that light! I am often thankful that I can look terrible enough to frighten girls and governesses alike. I never stand any nonsense. I always frighten them as soon as they begin it. It is the shortest and most efficacious way of dealing with silly or perverse people.'

'Well, dear,' said Alizon, with unwonted gentleness, 'I have one great comfort which I used not to have. I can send my other troublesome child to you, with the certainty that he is in good hands.'

'It is so little that I can do,' said Hilda, rather nervously.

'You think so, perhaps. It is a great deal to me to feel that when I come back he will have been interested and cheerful, instead of cross and moping. Hilda, I had such a horrid kind of dream last night. I could not sleep, and I was tossing and turning till at last, in a kind of doze, in which I believe I was more awake than asleep, it seemed as if something had gone wrong between you and me. I don't know what. In the dream there was a cause of some kind for it, but whether the cause lay with you or with me I don't

know. Only the wrongness was there, and it was horrible. When I was fairly awake again, I thought it over and smiled at it. I suppose if one were to find the law of gravitation playing tricks, or were to discover the sun rising at night instead of in the morning, one would never quite get over such an experience; and it would be much the same to me if —if my dream in any shape were to come true.'

'It never will,' said Hilda, in a rather deeper voice than usual. 'It never could.'

'No; it would be bad for you if it did. I'm not threatening, for it would be worse for me.'

'And will he not give up this ball?'

'No; unless you can persuade him,' said Alizon, laughing drearily. 'He is very decided about it, so the best thing is to get it over as soon as possible. It will be in a fortnight. Unfortunately one can't have a ball at a day's notice. You will get your invitations to-morrow. Now I must go. Good-bye.'

Hilda went back to the house. Godfrey was just about to set forth to his work, and was standing in the hall.

'You'll be in for dinner, old fellow?' she asked him, with a smile.

'I suppose so,' was the curt reply, without answering smile or look of affection.

Hilda gazed at him for a moment with an expression of rigid displeasure, then turned and went into the parlour. Letty was on the point of leaving it.

'Where are you going, Letty?'

'Into the kitchen to do my housekeeping.'

'Will you come for a walk after you've done?'

'I can't this morning. I shall be busy, and there *is* the tea-party at Mrs. Walsh's,' said Letty, turning to her with a heightened colour, 'And you accepted for it. It is partly for you that it is given. What are you going to do? What am I to say, if I go without you?'

'As if I ever thought of such a thing when *she* wanted me to do something for her!' said Hilda, almost contemptuously. 'Say—well, it is too bad that you should have to tell stories on account of my stupidity.'

'There would have been no need of any stories if you had simply told her you were engaged this afternoon,' said Letty, almost beside herself with vexation and the unprecedented circumstance of feeling driven thus to address Hilda, who, perhaps from the very differences in their characters, had always been her admiration from her childhood up.

'Letty!' Hilda's face flamed suddenly, 'I cannot imagine what has come over you and Godfrey. You speak to me sometimes with what I should call unkindness, if the idea were not too absurd. If you like, I will write a note for you to take to Mrs. Walsh, explaining that I have been obliged to undertake something which keeps me at home this afternoon.'

Letty, a basket of keys and papers in one hand, turned, and, though her heart was beating suffocatingly, she launched a last dart out of the bitterness of her soul.

'You had better explain to her what you have so suddenly been obliged to undertake. That would doubtless make it perfectly excusable to her.'

With that she left the room, apparently in great haste. But she paused outside the kitchen-door and put her hand to her heart.

'That I should have said such a thing to our Hilda!'

Hilda, left alone in the parlour, went to the window, and drummed on the panes as she looked out with a frown.

'They are base,' she was thinking in her heart. 'How dare they have such thoughts of me, as they must have to be able to say such things about me? I will not heed them. It is to her and to myself that I am accountable, not to them. And I am not afraid. What is there to be afraid of? There is no possibility of anything coming to be afraid of. What are these people of the neighbourhood to me?—and what have Godfrey and Letty turned into that they should be considering what Mrs. Walsh will think? Mrs. Walsh, forsooth! I will not alter a thing. I will keep my promise to her. Oh, how hateful for them to find fault, when she is so far beyond doing so! Well, she knows me, and they do not. It's so often the way with one's nearest and dearest.'

She turned into the room again, with uplifted head, but there was a sob in her throat, and tears were swimming in her eyes. She had the morning before her; books to read, letters to write, the sweet old garden, and the melancholy fishponds, which at first had so much enchanted her, round which to wander. All failed to give her a happy or satisfied hour. She took up her book, and, after making desperate efforts to read, threw it aside, and sat down to write. That attempt succeeded no better. She felt herself growing each moment more irritated over her own nervous irritation, over her own want of power to control her restlessness. At last, with a sound of exasperation, she suddenly flung her pen down, tore the paper across, and rose from her chair.

'Bah! I'm stifled. I can't sit still. What does it all mean?'

She wandered out into the garden, and out of it, through the wood to the fishponds. All was most forlorn and still and dreamful. It had been so lovely, had brought her such rest and peace—the happiest hours she had known for years had come to her here. Now, the whole atmosphere had become poisoned, and she felt as much stifled here as in the house. There was in her heart a burning sense of grief and injury against her brother and sister. Then came a gleam of light from another point, as it were. As she considered the situation, she almost admitted that it was painful, and that they had a right to be uneasy, but pulled herself up suddenly with a half-muttered:

'What would they have me do? Am I to refuse her request—decline to see him—run away, when there is nothing to run away from? Do they suppose I cannot guide myself through such a thing? What could I do, except what I am doing?'

At first she felt as if she had disposed of the matter with this question, and that there was nothing to be done. Then came a tiresome inner whisper from conscience, or common sense, or base cowardice, she knew not which.

'You could go away and leave this. Pay a visit to some other friends from whom you have invitations. That would settle it.'

She frowned over that, too. Why was she to go away? Why make excuses? What was it all about? What was this something which had suddenly cropped up in the relations which had been so delightful, and caused everything to go with a jar and a discord which sent a shudder all through her moral being?

'It means,' she thought within herself, 'that they are afraid Peregrine Blundell is making love to me, or is going to make love to me. They think no better of him than that. Seemingly they think no better of me than to imagine that I would let him do it.'

She was standing still, at the edge of one of the ponds, her slight figure leaning sideways against the trunk of a tree which stood close to the margin of the water. She looked down into the pond and clenched her hands as she thought these things, and with the thoughts came the conviction:

'Rather than that such a thing should happen through your weakness or through his, as that he should say words to you which you ought not to hear, and that you, his sister's friend,

in whom she believes with perfect faith, should listen to them—rather than that should happen, you had better by far spring into that water now, and never be heard of any more.'

Her face was terrible in the darkness of its expression. Then she bethought herself once again that she had strength, truth, loyalty on her side; that he, for all his cynical way of talking, had never uttered to her a word that was too familiar; and lastly that, whatever weakness he might be capable of, she at least was heart-whole, and therefore mistress of the situation.

At that moment a slight sound near her deceived her into thinking she heard an approaching footstep. She started violently. With a tremendous throb her heart sprang to her mouth. She looked wildly round, the thought in her mind being: 'I cannot meet him now.'

Then, in a moment, reason reasserted its power; she recognised that what she had heard had been some sound in the wood. It was not Peregrine approaching. She was alone, and quite free to proceed with her self-congratulation on her own heart-whole condition. She sank down, trembling and pale, upon the bench that was close at hand.

'Oh!' she said, in a little gasp to herself. 'This comes of paying any attention to other people and their unworthy suspicions.'

Two or three hours of this kind of mental debate did not form the best preparation for the interview of the afternoon, but she would not give in. Had she not passed her word to Alizon? Had not her brother and sister mistrusted her? They should have no grounds for believing that mistrust to be well founded.

After their early dinner, Letty went dolefully to get ready for her excursion to Mrs. Walsh's, who lived nearly two miles away. Godfrey had also been invited to the tea-party, but had refused at the time, saying he could not spare the time. He was devoting all his leisure to the study of a certain new departure in therapeutics, and told Letty he should be at home all afternoon until it was time for him to go up to Moorside for an hour.

'Well,' said Letty, 'I'll do my duty. I can leave early. I'm not an important person.'

Whether important or not, she looked a very handsome and attractive person, as she took her way to the unhappy garden-party, of which by this time they all wished they had never heard.

Hilda, disdaining to speak to or make arrangements with

any one, though she longed with all her soul to go to Godfrey and say, 'Surely you will come and bring your book into the garden,' went thither herself, and established herself in one of the deep wicker chairs which now stood out all day in a particular nook under trees. Thither she took some books and work. The work it was to which she devoted herself. It did not prevent her from thinking, and its monotonous repetitions soothed her mind and employed her restless fingers.

She tried to think that perhaps Peregrine would not come, and that then it would be all right. No one could say anything, and she would have kept her word to her friend. It did not reassure her to feel her heart sink with disappointment at the prospect of this possibility.

A moment afterwards it was made an impossibility, for, on lifting her eyes, she saw him sauntering across the grass towards her, smiling, careless in expression, gracious and graceful in aspect as usual.

He took off his hat when he saw that she saw him, came up to her, stooped, and took her hand.

'It was so good of you to stay in. Alizon told me you had put off some party or something, purposely to oblige her and indulge me. Being an invalid, and otherwise a detrimental, does bring with it some compensations, I find,' he said, looking at her with something in his eyes which belied the simplicity of his words.

'Oh, that was nothing!' said she, wishing at the same time that Alizon had not been quite so communicative in the matter. 'One is glad of an excuse for getting out of these tiresome garden-parties—at least, I always am. I think they are dismal things.'

'Oh, I am sorry to hear that. I hoped it was a real sacrifice,' said Peregrine, throwing himself into the other low chair, close to hers.

'Why—do you like people to make sacrifices for you?'

'You may think it a fearfully immoral admission on my part, but I have not the least objection to their doing so.'

'Then, in return, I suppose you have no objection to occasionally making a sacrifice for others?'

'Oh, I have, though. Is there any particular thing in that line which you could point out as suitable for me to achieve? If there were, and it would really gratify you, I would make a great effort.'

'I don't want you to please me. I want you to do what is right.'

'I love to hear you telling me what is right and what is wrong. What is this thing?'

'I did not mean to say anything about it. It is your talk of sacrifices that has brought it on. Are you still bent on having this ball which Alizon dislikes so much?'

At this Peregrine's face darkened.

'Yes, I am. I suppose Alizon put you up to saying that? I cannot imagine you doing anything so disagreeable of your own accord.'

'Then it is very well you should learn how disagreeable I can be of my own accord, for Alizon has nothing whatever to do with it. She did not put me up to saying it. She told me she was going to buy invitation cards to-day at Kirkfence.'

'Oh, ask something smaller than that. You are always saying how poor you are. I do not think you would be rich enough to give me the reward I should be obliged to have for making such a sacrifice,' he said, half-jestingly; but all the time he was observing her from his half-closed eyes, and did not miss a sign given by her expression, by the movement of her hands, or by any one of those slight and almost imperceptible tremors, glances, movements, which, so small in themselves, mean much under certain circumstances. As for Hilda, she was troubled—troubled by his tone, which in her simplicity she did not comprehend. Many a girl of eighteen would have read him off at a glance; would have gauged him at a single interview. Hilda Noble, with her six-and-twenty years, her past life of something like austerity, her heart hitherto cold and untroubled as virgin snow, found him an inexplicable, thrilling, fascinating riddle. She declined to admit to herself the possibility of his making love to her; his married state, her own close friendship with his sister—everything, she argued, rendered it impossible. Yet what was this emotion, the bare shadow of which, falling across her path, caused her such trouble? She shut her eyes and walked blindly on. If she kept rigidly to almost impersonal subjects, she felt, surely all must go right. Nevertheless, he had a provoking, disconcerting way of talking of a thing, approaching it from his point of view, without regard to hers.

'If you expect a reward, it would not be a sacrifice,' she said. 'I have been thinking seriously about it, and I don't think I shall be able to go.'

'Alizon mentioned that,' said Peregrine, in a tone of great alarm. 'But she had secured your promise, and I would wager almost anything that you will keep your promise to her.'

'I promised in a moment of excitement. I don't think she will hold me to it. I don't know how I could for a moment have made such a promise.'

'It was, as you say, in a moment of excitement. Does it not show how absorbed we become in the things of the present; how natural it is for things of the present to absorb us, that you and I, and Alizon, should have forgotten such a thing as your mourning? That, I admit, is an objection. But it seems to me that to gratify the living by giving them a pleasure, when they have so very few, is a better thing really than——'

'Hush!' said Hilda, decisively. 'We need not argue that out. I did wrong to mention it. Of course I am not so conventional as to stay away because of what people might say about it. I don't care. If it comes off I shall go, because, as you say, I have promised her to do so. But I certainly shall not dance. My heart would be too heavy. I should be wishing all the time that you had done what was right—and had given it up. Do decide to do so, before the invitations are out and it is too late!'

'You would not dance,' said Peregrine, with much calmness, and a slight smile (ignoring the while the last part of her sentence), 'because your heart would be too heavy. Neither should I, because mine is much too weak. I am speaking in a purely physical sense. Therefore, most likely, I should have all the more of your company. I think you are offering me a premium to continue in my runagateness.'

'I wonder Godfrey did not say the excitement would be very bad for you,' she said, hastily, endeavouring to bring her view into prominence again. 'I suppose you would have paid some attention to him if he had?'

'Not a jot, on such a matter. I should have felt that he had done his duty—by the way, when I see him I will ask him how it is he has *not* done his duty so far. By that means he would have acted up to his own high standard, and nothing further could have been expected from him. I have not a high standard, I suppose. Anyhow, I mean to have my ball.'

'You are hopeless. Why do you want to make yourself ill?'

'I shall not be ill. Good heavens! Do you suppose I shall excite myself to that extent over a trumpery dance? It is amusement I want, and I shall get it. It will amuse me to see how all who are bidden will come, in spite of every hard thing they may have said about me in the past. They will partake of my hospitality, dance in my house, and go away

primed with all sorts of hard things more to say about me in the future.'

'And does that amuse you?'

'I choose to think so, at any rate. Why are we sitting still here? Are you afraid of a little walk this afternoon, or will you come with me round the fishponds?'

'Oh, I don't mind the walk. I will go,' said Hilda, glad of the opportunity of moving about and escaping the half-mocking scrutiny which she was sensible he was bestowing upon her.

She wished they had not been going to the fishponds, but there was no help for it. She opened her sunshade, and they strolled away together.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

'I HAVE LOST YOU.'

GRADUALLY the light grew dimmer as the woods became thicker, and there was an afternoon stillness and dreamfulness over the enchanted region, which had, as it were, for its centre these still ponds, and for wall the trees, and for margin the gravelled paths. Peregrine strolled slowly on, saying nothing, with his eyes cast upon the ground. Hilda walked beside him, stooping now and then to pluck a flower or a feathery grass, but silent, too, from the very oppression of her heart. At last they came to the wooden bench, close beside the tree against which she had this morning leaned while holding communion with herself. She marked the spot and shivered a little, as she averted her eyes, and would have passed on.

But Peregrine stopped at this very spot.

'Let us rest here a little,' he said. 'There's something rather overpowering in this atmosphere, isn't there? Takes one's breath, and makes one feel stifled.'

'Ought you to stay here if you feel like that?' said Hilda, quickly, feeling somewhat alarmed.

'Oh, yes! It's nothing but the sultriness of the day. It will go off as soon as I sit still.'

He waited till she had sat down, then placed himself beside her. He glanced at her once or twice, before he said at last, deliberately:

'I wonder if Alizon thinks I don't know why she has gone to Kirkfence to-day?'

Hilda was silent, feeling paralysed. Never before had Pere-

grine made so open an allusion to his affairs, though he had let fall more than one vague and distant hint.

'You do not speak,' he said, 'yet you know why she has gone, don't you?'

'I—yes; she told me.'

'Of course she told you. She has gone to see my wife,' said Peregrine, slowly.

Then it flashed into Hilda's mind:

'He knows so much, but he does not know all, or he could not speak of it. He does not know of that letter, nor of the fear that has sent Alizon there to-day. She does not intend him to know either.'

She therefore merely replied, in rather a faint voice:

'Yes.'

'And my wife will not be at all glad to see her,' he proceeded, drily. 'I wonder Alizon does not leave her in peace. She is very strong, and can make many people do as she wishes, but she can never make Nelly's nature like her own, and she can never make her look at things from her point of view. But what's the use of pointing it out?'

Hilda sat in painful embarrassment. Again he had chosen a topic of conversation which she did not like. She knew not what to say; she had a dim idea that the best plan would be either to say, 'I will not talk about that,' or else to change the subject in a brutally pointed way; begin to talk of the summer's strawberry crops, or of something equally remote from what he had been saying. She caught a glimpse of him as he leaned a little forward, looking profoundly dejected, and so wretchedly ill, so it seemed to Hilda, and the brutality would not come.

'Yet you grudge me my ball, my little bit of distraction—and preach to me about doing what is right,' he said, quite gently, but rather reproachfully.

Hilda knew it was sophistry; but knew not how to combat it.

'Giving a ball won't make things any better,' said she. 'You must forgive me. I did not broach this subject, and I never should have done. But, since you have done it, I say I think you are hard on Alizon. She is doing all these disagreeable things for your sake. Surely it is not she who ought to teach your wife things she does not know, but you. How can any one who is shut out in the cold, and who feels injured and grieved—how can any such person do exactly what is right, just as if their surroundings were all right too?'

He was silent

'I hope you are not angry with me?' she said. 'I fear it is not suitable for me to speak on such a subject.'

'I am not angry; but—you don't know what you are talking about,' said Peregrine, turning his eyes full upon her, with an expression which caused her to shrink. 'You must forgive me for being so blunt, but you really don't. You have never been married, you see. I have. It makes all the difference.'

'Then why did you open it up?' she exclaimed, almost choking, a flood of angry colour rushing over her whole face, throat, ears; every bit of skin that could blush blushed then. 'Did you expect me to sit here and listen to you talking about such a thing, without saying a word?'

'Oh, I hardly know what I expected. I don't think I know why I mentioned it at all. It is such a hateful business. Yes, I do know, though,' he added, suddenly. 'It was for this: that I might tell you something; and you may listen to it; it will do you no harm. I've repented, of course, many a score of times, that I ever married her. I shall go on repenting it to the end of my life. I have raged against it, and cursed against it, and longed to be free. But I never knew till lately exactly what it meant—my having married her, I mean. I never knew all that I had lost by doing so.'

'You must have lost many things, of course,' she said, fearing his getting excited, 'but——'

'As for the many things, I don't care. They balance one another. I have lost one that outweighs all the rest: I have lost you.'

There was silence for a few minutes, while Hilda felt with wild bewilderment that the moment had come of which she had thought that morning—the moment when it would have been better for her to be in the water before her, than here, where she was, listening to him. When she could speak, she did not say any one of the things she felt she ought to have said. She did not say 'Silence!' She did not get up and walk away from him; but, turning to him, said, in a voice quivering with anger, and some other emotion of a kind she did not dare to define to herself:

'Lost *me!* How dare you speak so? How do you know you would ever have been able to win me?'

He did not reply for a moment, but sat still, with his eyes cast upon the ground, and she looked at him, her hand clenched on the bench between them, her breath coming and going with

stormy quickness. At last Peregrine looked at her with a smile.

'How can I explain how I know?' he said. 'I do know.'

'You know nothing—nothing,' she exclaimed, almost sobbingly, as if she were trying to defend herself from some foe stronger than she was, and saw her forces coming to an end. 'You know nothing. You suppose that because I have been friendly with you, knowing well your position, I should have been prepared to—to——' She gasped. She could not finish speaking her thought. 'Oh, it is base of you to have brought me here to say a thing like that to me; base and cruel. It is an abuse of friendship. Because I would do anything in the world that your sister asked me to do, you think I am in love with you,' she said, scornfully. 'If you were where you ought to be, you would be at Kirkfence, and Alizon would be sitting by my side at this moment.'

Her voice shook uncontrollably. She rose, abruptly saying:

'I cannot stay here; I shall go home.'

'Hilda!' He caught hold of her hand. 'Don't go off in a rage with me! Don't you see what I mean? I'll tell you, my saying it can harm no one—neither her, nor you, nor Alizon, nor me. If I had been free—if I had ever known you, long ago, before I knew her, do you suppose I should have made the mistake I did? No. The wrong thing came to me first, and I was deceived by it. Had the right one been first, I should have known it at once. And you, who are so good and so gracious, you would—well, I should not have lost you—as I said. That is all.'

She wrenched her hand away from his.

'That is all! It is a great deal too much,' she said, haughtily. 'It is what you have no right to say.'

With that she turned again, and had made some steps away when a slight groan caused her to turn her head once more in his direction. What she saw filled her with terror. She had never before met with any illness of the kind, but she knew that he had been seized with a spasm of the heart; whether the attack were a severe or slight one she had no idea. He was stooping in a crouched, huddled-up attitude, and the expression on his face was one of terrible agony—unfeigned, almost unbearable physical agony. In two steps she was at his side, her hand resting on his shoulder.

'Peregrine!' she breathed; 'are you conscious? Do you hear what I say?'

A slight murmur seemed to say 'Yes.'

'I will fetch Godfrey. In two minutes he will be here. Oh, keep up, if you can, till then, and forgive me—*forgive me!*' she sobbed in a heartbroken whisper.

Then, turning, she flew along the path, and into their own garden. If Godfrey should have gone out! No, she saw him in the dining-room, darted into the house, and up to him. White, breathless, panting, and almost fainting, she met his astonished gaze, and managed to gasp out:

'Go—go—to the fishpond—the bench! Peregrine Blundell is ill. I think he's dying. Oh, Godfrey, go!'

The next instant she knew that Godfrey had obeyed her behest. There was his book, flung upon the table; there was his chair, empty. She stood still for a moment, her hand on her heart, feeling as if she must die, so laboured and so painful was the breath she drew.

'I must go back, and help if I can,' she said, within herself; but, in spite of her intense longing to do so, it was two or three minutes before she could move. Her return to the wood was slower than her flight from it had been. At last she came in sight of them, and approached timidly, scarcely daring to go near them.

'Is he any better?' at last she asked Godfrey, in a low voice.

'Yes,' he answered, curtly.

Peregrine opened his eyes, and looked at her, and smiled also—a smile which stabbed her to the heart.

'Really, Miss Noble, I shall never forgive *myself*'—with an emphasis she understood—'for having caused you this alarm. It is you who need support, I think. I shall be all right directly.'

'Go home, Hilda,' said Godfrey, turning his head. 'It is not necessary for you to be here. I will help him home. It is not a bad attack. Or, what would be better, go to Undermoor, and desire them to send Mr. Blundell's servant. That will be the best.'

Without a word, she turned to do his behest, and then, returning to Little Undermoor, went slowly and sadly to her room, and shut herself in.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

HILDA FENCES.

PEREGRINE had recovered from the first acuteness of the attack which was only a slight one, before Alizon's return. He wanted Godfrey to say nothing about it.

'She will only worry—what's the use? I'm sure you understand.'

'Yes, I understand. But, you see, you have got to keep more than usually quiet for the next day or two after this,' said Godfrey, unheeding his evident desire to keep the matter dark. 'You had better just mention it to her, or I shall. She would worry a great deal more if she thought we were concealing something from her.'

Peregrine grumbled, but could only acquiesce, and indeed, by the time he had walked to the house very slowly, with the assistance of Godfrey and of Wilson, his own servant, he was ready to admit that he would certainly have to keep quiet for a while. But he was chafing, as Godfrey saw, and, though the latter had a shrewd inkling that there must have been words not altogether smooth between Peregrine and his sister, his affection for the young man got the upper hand, and his sorrow for his illness filled him with pity. He left him and went home again. Hilda was not visible when he went in. She was in her own room. Godfrey did not seek her. He had no intention of even asking her a question regarding the episode of the afternoon. He wished, rather mournfully, that she would display trust enough in his affection for her to tell him, but he had little hope that she would do so. It was about five when he got in. Soon Letty would be back. Then he remembered that Harold Ashby had been bidden to sup with them that evening. Godfrey was rather glad than otherwise. They lived in simple fashion, as suited their means and their household resources, having an early breakfast, a midday dinner, and an evening meal at half-past seven. Harold, therefore, was not due for some time yet.

Gradually the thunderousness which had seemed to pervade the moral atmosphere cleared off. Letty came home radiant from the garden-party to which she had so unwillingly gone. Godfrey looked at her in surprise.

'Why, you look quite as if you had been enjoying yourself,' said he.

'I did enjoy it, far more than I expected. And Mrs. Walsh didn't mind a bit about Hilda not being there,' she added, with a hearty laugh. 'She had got hold of a Lady Ermengarde Jones, no less, who has ridden across the desert dressed as a man, and who thinks in consequence that no one else can have an opinion on the Eastern question when she is by. So Hilda was not missed. Mr. Barras was there too, and he made fun of Lady Ermengarde Jones. It was shocking of him, but he did. She was unprepossessing to look at, and dreadfully bony. He called her *Arabia petræa*.'

'How brilliant!' ejaculated Godfrey, drily. 'Hilda is upstairs. Don't forget, Letty, that Ashby is coming to supper.'

'So he is,' cried Letty; 'and I said I would show him that some people even in England know what a salad is. I must put on my large apron, and go and make it.'

Wrinkling her brow she disappeared, on hospitable thoughts intent.

Godfrey went out for half an hour, and, returning, lighted his pipe, and strolled about the garden, meditating till Harold Ashby arrived. Everything seemed to have settled down quietly, yet he had an uneasy consciousness that the storm was only lulled—not over. He felt himself, however, powerless to avert it, or to predict what shape it would take. The only thing was to meet it as calmly as might be, when it should come.

Ashby came while it still wanted half an hour to supper-time, and they walked about and discussed life and plans. Godfrey was a little surprised at the fulness of detail with which the young Marylander entered into his private affairs—the sources from which he derived his income, and his great wish that he could lead at home the kind of half-public, half-private life, which, in the same circumstances, he could so easily have pursued in England.

'But I cannot do it there,' he said. 'I may settle down—go in for literature, or make a collection of pictures or coins, or rarities of some kind, first folio Shakespeares, or Tanagra figures. Or I may go in for the tow-row of the House of Representatives, and convulse the whole of Congress by espousing the grievances of the postmistress of Tom-Titsville, but I can't be what one of your English squires or magistrates is. And that is what I should like. I should like to have Blundell's opportunities without his ill-health.'

'If you like England so much—and Mrs. Van Bibber likes it too—why not stay and live here?'

'We do like England—but we like America, and especially

Maryland, better,' said Ashby. 'In the abstract, that is. I could imagine conditions under which I could stay in England contentedly, and make it my country.'

'Is it allowable to ask, generally, what kind of conditions those would be?'

'They might take the shape of an English wife, who—not unnaturally—preferred to live in her own country,' said Harold, very deliberately.

'Indeed,' said Godfrey, laughing, with an utter bland unconsciousness which brought a queer smile to Harold's face, 'have you—I mean, are those conditions existent in a concrete shape?'

'Maybe they are, maybe not,' replied Harold, with a little more twang than usual. 'Only I don't know whether she would prefer England to America. It remains to be seen.'

'It would be almost as well that you should be called upon to make the sacrifice since you are so willing. There's my sister Letty signalling to us to go in. I suppose supper is ready. Will you come?'

They went into the house. Godfrey found that Hilda had come out of her retirement, to all appearance quite recovered from her agitation. He looked rather wistfully at her, for it was wretchedness to him to have the slightest misunderstanding with her, but she ignored the look. There was a slight flush on her pale face. She greeted Ashby cordially, and talked much more than usual. Letty had forgotten the vexation of the morning, but she was absent-minded, falling into reveries, smiling every now and then to herself, and looking surprised when she was spoken to. They all rose from the table at the same time, and, irresistibly drawn by the warmth and fineness of the summer air, strolled into the garden and walked about, the two young men smoking.

'Is it true, Mr. Ashby, that the southern ladies, especially those of the Carolinas and Virginia, chew tobacco?' Hilda asked him.

'I'm sorry to say it is true in the spirit, though not always in the letter. They often have a box of snuff or tobacco, and they dip a stick into it, and chew the end of that. It is a wretched custom, and civilised opinion is so against it that it is becoming rapidly less common. But some of them do it. Ask my sister to tell you some of her experiences down at White Sulphur springs.'

'I do not know your sister,' said Hilda. 'Do you think she would let me make her acquaintance?'

'I'm sure she would,' said the young man, emphatically; and then, in a few moments, it was arranged that he should bring Mrs. Van Bibber to call upon Hilda on the following afternoon. Godfrey and Letty were both surprised and silently wondered what it meant; Letty in utter darkness, Godfrey with a glimmering of the truth in his mind. If she would but have spoken to him.

Nothing more was that night heard from Great Undermoor, and they all forgot or seemed to forget for a time the events which had taken place earlier in the day. Harold stayed late —so late that poor Letty, who had her own private affairs to consider, and who was longing to be alone, thought he would never go. She concealed her yawns for some time, wishful to keep up her dignity as hostess in her brother's house, but wondered pitiably the while what the others found interesting in that discussion about Republicans and Democrats—the Republican ticket, and Democratic ticket—the question of the coloured man, of the Chinaman—the Indian and the Irish questions. She sat and observed the others, pretending now and then to put a few stitches into a piece of work she held in her hand.

'Well, they are not commonplace-looking people, I'm sure,' she said to herself. 'I always thought Godfrey had a fine face, and it seems to me he has improved lately. And Hilda certainly looks different. She looks different since she came here. She looks handsome to-night, and I suppose she would always look what they call "distinguished." I wonder'—Letty reflected more slowly—'if that is what makes these men so attentive to her. Because they are. It seems so strange—after she has lived so long, and never had anything of that kind. I suppose Godfrey does not see that Mr. Ashby is very much taken up with her. I like him, especially when he comes out with a fearful Americanism, half shuts his eyes, and puts on that peculiar drawl. But he is very young. I don't think he can interest Hilda much. Even *I* should prefer to talk to an older man than that,' Letty thought, smiling to herself, as the recollection of sundry episodes at that afternoon's garden-party crossed her mind.

Soon after this, the door being open, and the others quite absorbed in the question of protection *versus* fair-trade, and the problem whether, if America were to treat herself to the latter, England would be injured or benefited by the change, she slipped out unobserved, and went to her own room.

When Harold at last rose to go, they first became aware

of Letty's departure, and smiled as they realised that his conversation had probably not appeared very brilliant to her.

The brother and sister accompanied their visitor to the gate of their garden, and Hilda reminded him of his promise to bring Mrs. Van Bibber to call.

He did not forget. At four o'clock on the following afternoon, while Hilda and Alizon sat together in the drawing-room at Little Undermoor, they saw the two figures coming up the walk.

'My visitors!' exclaimed Hilda.

'What visitors?'

'Mr. Ashby and his sister. He is bringing her to call upon me.'

'What in the name of wonder brought that about? Do you want to know her?'

'Y-yes, rather. I had a—fancy, we will say—to make her acquaintance. I'm not so exclusive as you. I have to rub shoulders with all sorts of people in the way of business,' said Hilda, demurely. 'You can be going away when she comes in, if you don't want to come in contact with her.'

'You wretch! I believe it is your daring to say things like that to me which makes me so silly about you. No, in common courtesy I will sit a few minutes longer——'

'And in common curiosity,' interpolated Hilda.

'Very well, if you like. I don't like Yankees, and Yankee women think all English women are frumps, so we shall have some pleasing ideas in common.'

'You are not to let out that you think she is a Yankee. Nothing would madden her more,' said Hilda, warningly. 'I invited her to come, remember.'

'Oh, I suppose you had forgotten that extraordinary leave-taking on his part, in our drawing-room on that eventful day,' Alizon had just time to say, and to observe with provoking glee the sudden blank look which came over Hilda's face before Hannah threw open the door, and, with an *aplomb* which did credit to Letty's numerous lessons on the subject, announced 'Mrs. Van Bibber' in a voice which did actually rise above a whisper.

The American lady, whether or not she thought all English women frumps, was certainly no frump herself. She was dressed in the perfection of simple elegance; her small face, narrow frame, and tiny thin hands and feet, though they left much to be desired in the matter of robustness, were managed with such consummate skill that they struck the beholder at

first as the ideal of grace and distinction. They made even Hilda look a somewhat big and large-boned woman. They gave a look of stiffness and awkwardness combined to Alizon—in the first moment, that is. As soon as conversation began, she could hold her own. Her direct gaze took in Mrs. Van Bibber at a glance. Mrs. Van Bibber's languid eyes measured Miss Blundell too, at once. Each woman felt that, though the antipodes of the other, she had met her match, and each felt an instinctive respect for the foeman worthy of her steel whom she confronted.

Harold introduced his sister and Hilda to one another. Mrs. Van Bibber held out her hand, and, *more Americano*, repeated gently:

'Miss Noble.' Then, after a slight pause, 'I'm glad to meet your brother's sister. Dr. Noble and I have been allies since the first moment we met.'

'I know,' said Hilda, smiling; 'he has often spoken of you to me.'

When all the introductions were completed, Mrs. Van Bibber sank into a chair, with a tired appearance, as of one who has made unwonted exertions, and, turning once more to Hilda, observed:

'My! *Yes!* He had a time of it when he first came to that place. I watched the entire contest. He had hard work to rout Dr. Burton, but he did rout him.'

'What do you think of "that place," as you very justly call it?' asked Alizon, abruptly.

'I don't think anything,' replied the American lady, with slightly accentuated nasal intonation. 'I'm just absolutely certain that it is as great a fraud as exists on this urth.'

Alizon nodded.

'I see we agree on the subject,' she said. 'But your brother tells me you have made a long stay there.'

'I have. The bracing air of this district is no fraud, at any rate. It has made a new woman of me, and I'm inclined to let it do its best for me. I *have* had bad health; so bad that I am willing to sacrifice anything for the chance of having it good again. That's why I stay here.'

There was something so genuine, and at the same time so pathetic in the expression of her eyes, and of her nervous, mobile face as she said this, that it carried conviction to both her hearers, and they felt that it perhaps required more resolution and spirit on Mrs. Van Bibber's part to carry her fine clothes with such easy grace, and to present to the world such

a compact and undemoralised outer woman, than they were quite able to understand.

'Then it has been a sacrifice?' said Hilda, gently.

'Why, yes, of course, isn't it a tremendous sacrifice for any woman with brains in her head, and a desire to see and know the best things that can be seen and known, to shut herself up months in a place like that, where there's no talk about gossip, no reports but slanders, and no company worth calling by the name? It has been a very great sacrifice to me, not to mention what it has cost my brother. Fancy a young man passing his time in that way! But he's just devoted to me, is Harold; and he won't suffer, mentally or morally, from his kindness.'

'Oh, my dear Nesta, there are many compensations,' he interrupted her, quickly.

'Well, you have learnt something of English country life and society. I selfishly try to console myself with that reflection sometimes,' said his sister, smiling affectionately at him.

Hilda was serving her with tea. Alizon declined any, and said she would go. Harold offered to go with her as far as her own garden if he might. Thus Hilda and Mrs. Van Bibber were left alone. They talked away easily and pleasantly till Harold returned. Mrs. Van Bibber did not stay very long, but engaged Hilda to come up and see her soon. Would she come and dine with them the day but one afterwards?

'In our own room, of course,' she said. 'I never fully understood the value of money till I found it would even procure me a private room in a hydropathic establishment.'

Hilda laughed and promised to go. She had forgotten Alizon's jest about Harold's leave-taking the first time they had met. When they had gone, she sat down and reflected. She was quite aware that both Alizon and her own brother and sister were somewhat surprised at her sudden overtures to Mrs. Van Bibber. But, now that the step had been taken, she did not much mind their surprise. In this quiet place, with no work on hand—nothing to do but 'rest and amuse myself,' she thought, with some melancholy—she felt too much at the mercy of any one who chose to present himself or herself upon the scene, and claim her time and attention. If everything had been smooth and straight, and as it had been at first, with regard to the Great Undermoor people, she would have asked nothing better than to go on, day after day, seeing no one but them, Godfrey and Letty. But she had had a fright, and a shock. She felt that things were becoming unruly; and had

a kind of futile hope that by striking up an acquaintance with Mrs. Van Bibber she might perhaps both divert her own thoughts and see less of Peregrine and of Alizon. She had not summoned up the moral courage necessary to say she was going away altogether, to finish her holidays in some other place, because she told herself it would cause surprise and vexation to Alizon, would bring on reproaches and questions which, with what there was present in her mind with regard to Peregrine, she would not be able to answer frankly and openly. She seemed to foresee suspicion and coldness on Alizon's part. The bare idea of such a thing was torture to her. While she thrilled even now at the recollection of Peregrine's words, she yet had the consciousness that in the hour of danger, emergency, or in any moral contingency, he would be simply useless. She knew it was his sister whom she loved, and valued, and wanted to keep for her own. She had a shrewd inkling, despite her simplicity and inexperience, that when once she would be removed from Peregrine's neighbourhood he would soon recover the loss of her society. The next best thing was, to give him as little of it as possible until she should go, once for all. She saw a great many sides to the question, but not one of them clearly and definitely enough to enable her to attach herself to it exclusively, casting aside all others. She temporised; out of her very love and scrupulousness came her weakness in this emergency.

Besides, to take the meaner side of the matter, in spite of her vexation and apprehension at the idea of anything wrong between herself and Alizon, she was not without a touch of secret pleasure in the homage implied in Peregrine's avowal to her. What woman exists who would be at all angry at being told by a man that had he known her early enough he would have been a better man—would have led a worthier life than he had done? She glozed over much, for the sake of that reflection. Her departure also would convince Godfrey that he had been right all along; right in warning her against Peregrine; right in his coldness to her when she allowed him to visit her; right, in fact, in all of what she called his unworthy suspicions. This new acquaintance would help her to tide over the gap between now and the end of the holidays, to which period she looked forward with a mixture of dread and longing sufficiently typical of her then state of mind.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

NESTA MAKES A PROMISE.

HAROLD ASHBY and his sister did not exchange a word relative to their visit to Little Undermoor until the afternoon of the very day on which Hilda was to dine with them. They spoke a few words about Miss Blundell, but it was not with Miss Blundell that the thoughts of either were occupied, and, as a matter of fact, this reticence between them was a very unusual thing.

On this particular afternoon, about half-past four, when his sister had had her siesta, and was drinking the one cup of tea which she had become English enough to like at this hour, Harold strolled into the sitting-room, and, resting his elbow on the mantelpiece, looked down on her, as she still reclined on her 'lounge,' enveloped in something that looked like a billow of mull, frills, and delicately tinted ribbons, and said, in the tone of one who wants an answer:

'Well, Nesta, what have you to say to me?'

'Say to you; about what, dear?'

'You know quite well about what. And I know that what you have to say isn't all approval, or you would have told me five minutes after we had left the house. "She's just lovely." You don't think she is just lovely, eh?'

'In some ways I think she is, if it's Miss Noble you mean.'

'Whom else should I mean?'

'Well, no one, I suppose, after what you've told me lately. I liked her at once, as I so often do like these English women,' said Mrs. Van Bibber, pensively. 'She did not show to the best advantage. She was a little swamped by that friend of hers—and let me tell you, Harold, that is the rival you have to fear, and not any man in the world—in this neighbourhood at any rate. I could see something of her character for all that. She is a girl no one could pass by—at least, no one like you and me, who have eyes in our heads. I like her for that. She is none of your nonentities. How I detest nonentities,' she added, with a hearty emphasis. 'She looks—well, she is out of the common, quite. No doubt of that. If you took her home, Harold dear, all the girls and women you have ever known, or flirted with, or been in love with, and who, married or single—for a woman never forgets about a man who has ever interested her in any way—would criticise her pretty sharply, might say

they hated her, or that she was proud and haughty, and odious, or that she was a blue-stocking, but not one of them could say she was a fool, and not one of them could say she was like a dozen other women. And there's that in her which would make her *interesting* to the last day of her life.'

'Well, what more would you have?' he asked.

He had listened in profound silence, and with profound attention to her remarks, apparently giving his whole soul to the consideration of them. Now he moved a little and looked at her anxiously and eagerly. Mrs. Van Bibber sighed and looked at him long before she replied. Under her unfailing self-possession, behind her slightly hard and unemotional exterior, there was a great and almost maternal love for this splendid young brother of hers. He and she—the eldest and the youngest—sole survivors of what had once been a large family, were very much one to the other.

She had always known he would fall in love and get married some time, and, without any affectation of looking forward with joy to that event, she had resolved to make the best of it and of the wife, when the momentous hour should come. She was trying to do so now, but she was silent so long and looked so grave, not to say sad, that at last he repeated his question.

'What more would you have, I ask?'

'I would have her in love with you,' she replied, slowly, distinctly, and remorselessly.

Harold flushed, and suddenly stood upright, looking at her. Then he laughed a little.

'That would be making the course of true love run uncommonly smooth,' he said. 'I admit that you are right. She does not love me, and she has not the faintest idea what I think about her. Well, that's a difficulty which may be overcome. I'll wager that it will go right in time. I will take the risk.'

'There's another thing I must say,' proceeded his sister, 'now that we are fairly talking it over. Unless I am much mistaken, she has a peculiar temperament. If she is unhappy, she will be desperately unhappy, so unhappy that it will be torture to her. If she were unhappy with you, Harold, there would be no concealing it. She would make you very unhappy, too. She would have no mercy on you, because she would have none on herself. I can read it in her face, in those lines of her mouth, and in the way in which she smiled at certain things that were said. She has splendid qualities. I guess Miss Blundell quickly found that out. Now, *she* is a different sort; if she were unhappy, and chose to conceal it, no human

being but herself would ever know of it. No one can have splendid qualities without their defects. I hate to croak about things, but I don't feel as if she would make you happy. Harold, you know I'd do anything in the world for you, but is it too late for us to go away from here and leave her? I'll pack up and leave to-morrow, if you think it would be of any use.'

He laughed a little.

'Quite too late,' he said. 'It has been too late ever since I saw her.'

'Of all things for my sober, level-headed Harold to take such an idea into his head as this!' exclaimed Mrs. Van Bibber. 'Well, I shall not dispute with you. You have had a happy life all along, and smooth seas to sail on. I feel as if you were going to launch out into a stormy one, now. You are your own master. You must be your own pilot. It isn't for *this* to guide you.' She looked with a sad smile at her own feeble hand. 'I suppose your mind is made up.'

'My mind is made up to marry Hilda Noble.'

'But suppose she refuses you—for I presume you'll go through the formality of asking her before you marry her—and English women and American women are apt to mean "no" when they say it.'

'Well, she can refuse me. Refusals are not the end of everything between people. When I see her married to some one else, I'll drop it. Till then I shall look upon her as mine, and as far as a man may, without telling lies or doing anything unfair, I shall do all I can to make her marry me. It is a risk, you say. I'm strong. I will take the risk and face the consequences.'

'Well, well! That is like you always were,' said Mrs. Van Bibber, with languid approval in her thin face and tired eyes. 'That is your view of the case—the course you mean to take. Mine shall be, that, since you have made up your mind, I will not oppose you, and that from this time I'll treat her and judge her as if she were my own sister. I can't do more than that. I am strong too, in some ways, you great tall fellow; and, like you, I'll take the risk and face the consequences. So now, I suppose, we understand each other.'

'I suppose we do. Thank you, Nesta,' he said, stepping to her side, stooping and kissing her cheek. 'When you give your word, a fellow knows he may depend upon it. You have promised all I could possibly wish—more than I had a right to ask, because I see you are not altogether satisfied in your mind about it. Perhaps you cannot understand that I would rather

be unhappy with her than happy with any one else I have ever seen. Now, time is getting on, I expect you have some finery or other to arrange. I'll go and take a little walk before dinner.'

He departed, turning to give her a nod and a smile as he went out of the room. Nesta sat still for a little while, one thin small hand supporting her chin, the jewels flashing on her fingers with the unwonted quickness of her breathing. She seemed to be thinking something out. When the problem was solved, it was a sigh, not a smile that greeted the end of the effort.

'If it were to go all right, she would be splendid,' she said within herself. 'She would be good enough even for him, if she were in love with him, as I told him. He didn't like that, poor boy. . . . But, if it goes wrong, I'm afraid to think *how* wrong it might go.'

CHAPTER XXXIX.

BEHAVING LIKE A BRUTE.

The two women were seated together and the table was laid when Harold returned from his walk. He greeted Hilda with the utmost calm and tranquillity, almost with indifference—so that his sister, though she knew his very deliberate way of going about things, experienced a little surprise. She watched Hilda with some jealousy; her eyes devoured every look, every smile, every turn of the graceful head, and her ears criticised every intonation of the voice with which she spoke to, answered, Harold. The more she heard and saw, the more convinced she was that she was right—that this girl had interests, and absorbing ones, perhaps griefs too, of her own, and that, not being a vain or self-conscious girl, she was simply unaware of the emotions she had excited, and the resolution which had been formed concerning her. If the case had been the case of any one but her brother Harold, Mrs. Van Bibber would have been calmly and philosophically amused by watching it. Even as it was, she could not help being amused, but she had a sort of resentment, too, of the obvious fact that here was a girl to whom her cherished Harold, the pride of her heart and the joy of her life, was absolutely indifferent. It was so unnatural and reprehensible, to Mrs. Van Bibber's mind, that her feelings in the matter took a sudden turn. From being afraid that, if

Harold gained his end in this matter, the sequel might prove disastrous, she began to be angrily fearful of his not gaining it; of his having to endure grief, rebuff, and mortification at the hands of this serious, pale-faced, cold-looking girl, who looked straight into his eyes, and was not in the least disturbed because she did not in the least comprehend the language they spoke.

Nevertheless, she kept her promise. Harold had to acknowledge to himself that Nesta was more than merely loyal—she was great. She did her best to show Hilda off to advantage, and she succeeded. They talked much about travelling, both in the Old World and the New, and Hilda frankly confessed that it was her 'lack of gold' which had always prevented her from taking that diversion which she often longed for extremely. Then she said that she and Alizon Blundell had been planning the delightful scheme of quietly taking their departure, some day, without saying good-bye to their friends, embarking on a Cunarder at Liverpool, and taking a holiday.

'But it is only talk,' she added, laughing. 'She might be free to do it, some time, but I—never.'

'Why never?' asked Harold, abruptly.

She lifted her hands, and let them fall again.

'For lack of the wherewithal—now and always.'

She would not stay late, and when she came down to walk home Harold was waiting to go with her.

It was nearly ten o'clock when they set forth, and therefore, as nearly as possible, dark. There was still a faint grey remnant of twilight left in the western sky, but all the earth was in shadow. Askley Bridge retired early. The silence on all sides was complete and profound. Of course there were no lamps; local boards and gas had not penetrated into that district. They had some distance to go along a rough, stony, moorland path, but at last they descended from it upon the high-road. Hilda had the key to the private gate and tunnelled way of Great Undermoor, but as she could not let Harold out again by the same way, and did not choose to consult her own convenience now, and afterwards let him find his way back as well as he could, she said nothing about it, and they took the much more lengthy route by the high-road.

Ashby was rather silent. He had been talking away all evening to his sister and her, making merry a good part of the time at the expense of travelling English and Americans whom he had met up and down, and of whom he related stories which had made them both laugh. He said little now, however, and ere they arrived at the end of their walk Hilda felt the cloud

once more descending upon her spirits, and had begun again to chafe over the complications of her situation. Love and duty, so often entangled and intertwined—the writhen, twisted skein which Fate thrusts into our hands whether we will or not, and then, blindfolding us, bids us unravel it or die some kind of death, mental, moral, or physical—this web she now held, and could not rid herself of it.

As they neared the gate of Little Undermoor, she said to her companion:

'It is not late. You will come in and speak to Godfrey, won't you?'

'Depends,' was the, to her, puzzling reply. 'That will be for you to decide by-and-by.'

'Why for me?' she asked, laughing. 'I know Godfrey would be delighted, and his friends are always welcome to me.'

'I'm glad to hear that. I don't know any fellow I like as well as your brother. We chummed almost at first sight, and have got on splendidly together ever since.'

As usual, when anything particularly interested or excited him, Harold's native accent came out rather more strongly than usual. Hilda noticed it now, and smiled a little to herself. She did not exactly dislike it, but unconsciously took it as part and parcel of the various things which made Harold a 'foreigner'—not one of themselves—a very agreeable, interesting foreigner, no doubt, but still distinctly a person who was nothing but a stranger casually crossing her path. As a sort of complement to this voice of Harold, she seemed also to hear that of Peregrine—soft, gracious, pure in its accent, utterly without affectation or idiom, save what he used consciously and of intention—a most delightful voice and manner of speaking, which might have been taken as an index of the man's outward aspect, whether of his mind and disposition, or not; of that polished, graceful personality which he could, when he chose, render so captivating. Perhaps the contrast between the two was in nothing better typified than in this, she thought, and wondered when she would see Peregrine again. They had not met since that wretched scene by the fishpond.

Harold's voice again broke in upon her reverie. They were now near the gate of Little Undermoor, and he slackened his pace.

'You don't say a word to that,' he observed.

'To what?' she asked, startled.

He laughed.

'I saw you were in a brown study. You have been, more

or less, all the evening. But I wish, if you don't mind, that you would try to bring your mind to contemplate this fact; that we are here, at your garden-gate, and that I very much want to say something to you before you—or we—go in.'

'Do you? Well, there! I am all attention,' said Hilda, coming out of her dream, and realising that Harold was standing with her beside the gate, not exactly in a good-bye attitude.

'You were talking to-night about America, and how you would like to go there.'

'Yes. There's nothing strange in that, is there? A loyal American ought not to think so.'

'I don't think so. I was thinking of something else.'

She had put her hand on the top rail of the gate, meaning to swing it open, as usual. But he held it fast.

'Were you?'

She was indifferent, and a little impatient to get in and be alone with her own thoughts.

'I was. I was thinking how *I* should like you to see America.'

For one moment a horrible, grotesque notion came into Hilda's mind—perhaps partly owing to the overwrought state of her nerves. She had heard such odd things about Americans—their freaks, their hospitality, their generosity, when they were disposed to show it—above all, about the freedom of social intercourse between the young people of opposite sexes. Mrs. Van Bibber was decidedly unconventional; why should her brother be less of an original than herself? Was he going to invite her to go to America as his visitor, in consequence of her candid remarks as to her own poverty? If he committed such a piece of vulgarity, she would let him understand what she thought of it. But she made answer, in a flippant tone:

'Indeed! It's very good of you. But, you see, you cannot do anything in the matter, can you? And, after all, I don't suppose I ever shall see it. It was a dream. There's no harm in such dreams. They keep you going many a time, though they may never come to anything.'

Privately she was thinking:

'Oh, may I be spared the full details of the route—the description of the Eastern cities, and of the order in which they should be visited—the renascent south, the mighty west, and all the rest of it!'

Again Harold's voice interrupted her.

'I could do something in the matter if you would, or could.

I see you don't understand what I am driving at. *I* should also like you to go to America, and to see it when you got there—with me—as my wife.'

Hilda's hand dropped from the top of the gate. Paralysed with astonishment, she could do nothing and say nothing, but only stand and stare at him, searching the face she could only see vaguely in the darkness for some explanation of the petrifying announcement she had just heard. Had she heard anything of the kind? He did not go on. In half a minute after he had ceased speaking it seemed as if hours had passed since she had heard him, and she must have been delirious when she imagined he had said such a thing. He said nothing to help her out. For a moment she thought she had better treat it as a dream, and wish him good-night as if nothing had been said. But something within did not allow her to do that, and at last she said, in a tone of expostulation:

'I cannot have heard you aright.'

That, at any rate, committed her to nothing. Perhaps she would awake in the morning and find it had all been a disconcerting dream. That last straw of comfort and hope was ruthlessly swept away by his next words.

'Oh yes, you did,' he said, very gravely, not moving, and speaking with the utmost deliberation. 'You heard me right enough. It surprised you. Well, nothing that I said or did in the way of hints, or looks, or indirect statements had the slightest effect upon you. Ever since you came here, weeks ago, I have been trying to make you see, but you would not. Sometimes I have gone back to Moorside and almost cursed you because you would not see. But, on the whole, I like you better for it. I don't deny that this shows it to have been a matter of no importance to you. But it is one of very great importance to me, and, as I could not indirectly get you to see it, I had to thrust it at you directly—and, I daresay you think, brutally. I can't help that. Now that you do know, you will be fair and just, and think about it aright too, won't you?'

'But, Mr. Ashby!' she said, almost piteously. 'What do you take me for? How can I think of such a thing?'

'How do people ever begin to think of such things?'

'How!—ah, how!' exclaimed Hilda, her voice suddenly deepening, and her heart contracting. 'I cannot tell. But I can tell you that I'm very sorry, and, though you have begun to think of it, you had better stop doing so, for I—it is not in my power ever to think of it. Do you understand? Not in

my power. It has been a passing fancy. You will forget it, and it will be all right.'

'It is a pretty strong fancy,' he answered her, in the tone of one not in the least degree convinced or even impressed by what had been said to him. 'It originally took possession of me the first time I ever saw you—at Great Undermoor, do you remember? I was calling there when you walked into the drawing-room. The "fancy," as you call it, entered my head that moment. It has been there ever since; it is there now; it will be there always. Do you see?'

'No, I do not see,' she replied, roused by his unbending tone to doggedness and anger in her turn. 'He speaks as if he had some right to think of me in this way,' she said within herself, and her anger grew fiercer. She did not again say, 'I am sorry,' but repeated, 'I say again it is impossible—because I *cannot*.'

'Is there any just cause or impediment!' he asked.

She felt herself tremble with mingled indignation and apprehension. Her whole being was now in a state of rebellion —wild and unreasoning rebellion. Everything about the situation appeared hateful to her; she felt as if she had been entrapped, and her words contained scarcely the semblance of courtesy as she answered him.

'Yes, there is. I have everything here—my work, which I love, and for which my whole life has fitted me. Perhaps you don't understand that a woman who has stood alone and walked alone, as I have, becomes independent, just as much as a man does who has had the same thing to go through, and consequently she is not anxious to cling to the first arm that may be held out to her.' She spoke with passionate scorn. 'That is one reason. The others are that my brother and sister are here, and friends who are dearer to me than my life.' She could not prevent herself from trembling in her excitement— she would gladly have thrust him from her physically, with a push of her hand, just as she was trying to repulse him morally. 'Am I to leave all that just because a man who is—nothing— to me, holds out his hand, and says "Come"? You must be mad.'

'I won't persecute you,' was the imperturbable reply, which made her feel as if she must burst into hysterical laughter. 'That would be unmanly. I expected something like this, of course. Do you suppose that if I had imagined you would, as you say, cling to the first arm offered to you, I would ever have offered you mine? No. There are plenty of women who will

do that. But I tell you that your just cause and impediment means just nothing to me. You will change your mind. It is all right. I shall never change my mind, but you will change yours. I don't know how, or when, but I know that you will. At any rate, you can never again say that you don't know what I mean. I like things to be plain and free from misunderstandings. Now, see! The gate is open. There is nothing to hinder you from going in.'

She almost darted into the garden in angry silence, as he held the gate open to her. She had made several steps towards the house, when suddenly another thought flashed into her mind. Her impulse was to leave him there and never speak to him again. But there was not only herself to consider. She had been very sore-hearted about her faint but painful estrangement from Godfrey, caused by their difference about Peregrine. Was she to deprive him of both his friends? At any cost of self-humiliation that must be prevented. She turned suddenly, and going back, said gently:

'Mr. Ashby!'

'Yes?' said Harold, who had closed the gate, and was leaning on the outside of it, watching her.

'I had forgotten. You won't visit this upon Godfrey? My brother thinks a great deal of you, and he is so good, and I—oh, I can't bear to bring more trouble on him. He is so much better than I am. Try to be the same to him in spite of this, won't you?'

Harold laughed a little.

'I thought you would remember that,' he said. 'But it shows you don't understand my position. I shall always be the same, as I said. Your brother Godfrey will be the same, and more, to me, not in spite of, but in consequence of, this very thing. For that matter, why should I not go in and speak to him now? Then he will see that you have had an escort home.'

'Oh, if you would,' she said, feeling thankful at first, and then, as they went towards the house, realising vexedly that Harold, out of his firm purpose and in spite of the sharp rebuff she had given him, was by far the stronger and more self-possessed of them; for she, as she was fully conscious, had no desire at all to face Godfrey just yet, until she should at least have made up her mind whether she was going to tell him what had happened.

The front door stood open. Godfrey, as usual, was working, this time in his own little study. Hilda pushed open the door,

and said, in as natural and unconscious a tone as she could summon up:

'Godfrey, Mr. Ashby has walked home with me, and if you are not busy he will sit with you a while.'

Godfrey looked up. Hilda let Harold pass before her into the room, then closed the door upon them, and, suddenly feeling profoundly exhausted in both mind and body, went upstairs and sat down in her own room.

The more she reflected upon the occurrences of the evening, and upon this, its climax, the more angry and exasperated she became—not so much with Harold, who, she acknowledged to herself, had had to choose the best time he could find for making his avowal, and had certainly selected neutral ground and a reasonable opportunity for doing it, but Mrs. Van Bibber, who, she instinctively felt, must have known a good deal about this—with her own blindness and preoccupation—for she now recalled many words and signs on Harold's part, which, read by the light of the present, could bear but one construction—with circumstances—with everything and with nothing. Her overwrought nerves vibrated with a thrill of intense irritability to her reflections on the subject. Everything was going wrong with her. The beautiful friendship between herself and Alizon, in which she had rejoiced—of which she had been proud, was, as she knew, cankered at its very root. She dared not dwell upon this. She dared not look forward to the struggle which, she knew, would presently have to take place between herself and Peregrine, if she was to be true to the woman who had expended upon her the whole trust and confidence, warmth and love of her great, hot, imperious heart, and who, as she felt in her inmost soul with a kind of worship, was on altogether another plane, morally, from the graceful, selfish trifler with life, with duty, and with honour, whose fancy had now been attracted by her, and who would follow his fancy, would have his amusement, at what cost soever to the feelings or happiness of others. Hilda told herself she was a coward in the matter when she dared not to look forward to this struggle. She was trying with all her strength to stave it off, to temporise until such time as she would be once more at her work, wounded but safe. As if that trouble were not enough, here was Harold Ashby, a man on whom she had not bestowed two thoughts, standing before her and saying, or almost saying, he intended to take her to America as his wife. When she said 'no' with vehemence, he did not give it up, but persisted that she would change her mind. Had she been in her best and

strongest state, mentally and morally, she would have laughed at it. But she could not laugh at it now; it oppressed her with a kind of fear. There was to her something revolting in it. A haughty, virgin pride, an almost animal instinct rose in arms as she recollected his look and the tone of his voice. She clenched her hands, and stamped her foot on the ground, saying between her teeth:

'I never will. He may give it up.'

She was in a state of frightful restlessness and perturbation. All her faculties were on the alert. Her very hearing seemed to become abnormally acute. She heard every sound—heard Godfrey let Harold out, and the cordial good-nights they exchanged. Something within her said that Harold had not spoken to Godfrey. He meant to depend upon his own strength, then? She smiled grimly. Neither would she say anything to Godfrey; it would be giving the incident far too much importance. Then she heard Letty's step moving about in her own room just across the passage, and her voice softly humming a tune to herself. Ere long Letty was in bed, and all was quiet. Then Hilda, with a sigh of relief and some relaxation of the tension at her heart, threw off her bonnet, mantle, and dress, put on her dressing-gown, and opened the door. It was half-past eleven. But Godfrey was still up, and would be for a long time yet, as she knew. He had the true professional man's love for late hours and the solitude of night for his hardest reading and thinking.

'Poor Godfrey! It's a shame to disturb him. But I won't keep him a minute if he will give me what I want.'

She glided downstairs, knocked at his study door, and was bidden to come in.

'Hilda!' he exclaimed, in surprise. 'Ashby said he believed you were tired, so I thought you had gone to bed.'

'I am tired—horribly tired; but I am so wide awake, Godfrey. Being in bed is just torture when you feel like that. I believe I am nervous or something—heaven only knows why,' she said, with a not very merry laugh. 'That is why I came. Haven't you got any sleeping stuff here that you could give me?'

'I have "sleeping stuff," as you call it; but not to give you, Hilda, my dear.'

'I long so to go to sleep, and forget everything, and I am sure I shall be tossing about till morning.'

'Well, toss about till morning, and to-morrow take a thorough rest. You will be sleepy enough by night, and will have earned your sleep, not stolen it.'

'If you have ever felt as I do, you would not be so hard about it. You gave me something once before—why not now?'

'No, not now. And, Hilda, you said at first you were nervous, "heaven only knew why." Now you say you want to go to sleep and "forget everything." What should you have to forget? Cannot I help you?'

He was leaning his elbows on the table and looking across it at her, almost wistfully. Hilda, in the midst of her unrest, felt a sob rise in her throat. Why not now—this moment—tell him every thought that troubled her, every fear that oppressed her? He would counsel her well, she felt—there would be no triumphant, 'I told you so, and you would not listen to me,' about his reception of the news. Still, he would have been right—she would have confessed to defeat—and she was not defeated yet. She was not going to give in yet. Why whine and sentimentalise to her brother on such a matter?

'Oh, when I said "forget everything," I meant forget that I was tired and sleepless and all that kind of stupidity. I have nothing to tell.'

She spoke with cool indifference, but did not look at him. She felt that if she were to look at him steadfastly she might not be able to keep up this show of not having anything on her mind. Yet, almost without looking, she was aware of the shadow of disappointment that crossed his face. There was a momentary silence. Then, rising, he said, in a low tone of unchanged kindness which cut her to the heart:

'Well, if you feel sure you cannot go to sleep by going to bed, lie down on that sofa, and I will go on writing. It is often soothing to sleepless people to feel there is some one else near, who is also awake.'

'Oh, don't you mind? I really think I should like that.'

'Mind?—no. It's a comfortable old sofa. Lie down. This shawl will prevent you from taking cold. I will shade the lamp—so. You don't mind my smoking? Perhaps it will send you to sleep. And if you want to talk, talk. I'm not obliged to be very particular about this work.'

Hilda breathed a sigh of relief as she lay down. The very strangeness of the situation brought a soothed feeling. Soon a welcome physical weariness stole over her, and relieved her excited brain. By-and-by she felt drowsy. She saw Godfrey's figure less clearly—it began to be as misty as the wreath of smoke from his pipe. Once or twice she started into wakefulness again, stabbed with the feeling that she had been unkind

to him. But presently she was sound asleep, and she continued to be so for many hours. When she awoke she was bewildered. There was Godfrey still, with his book and his writing things, but reading by the light of a pair of candles. The lamp was out.

'I have been to sleep. What time is it?'

'Nearly five in the morning. I was not going to disturb that sleep of yours, and I thought you might be nervous if you awoke and found yourself alone, and every one else upstairs.'

'Godfrey! You are cracked. You might have saved yourself all this if you would have given me a dose of chloral.'

'Well, you might as well go to bed now,' he said. 'Go upstairs, and I will put out the lights, and sleep an hour or two myself.'

She kissed him hastily, and went away. The hours of sleep had calmed her nerves, and when she got into bed the slumber returned to her eyelids once more. It was late when she awoke, and when she looked forth from her window it was as if the grass, the flowers, and the trees had been released from the cover of a dark veil, and looked their natural colours once more.

CHAPTER XL.

NEWS FROM MARIETTA SMITH.

It was nearly the end of August, and the day had at last dawned on which the much-talked-of ball was to take place at Great Undermoor. Godfrey and his sisters had agreed to go. Letty had had many scruples, but had finally decided that what Godfrey thought right she might do without compunction, so she gave herself up to the pleasure of preparing a very simple and inexpensive toilette for the occasion, and decided that for that event at any rate there should be a burying of the tomahawk, which, whether acknowledged or not, she always felt, lay sharp and naked between herself and the Blundells. When Hilda came to contemplate the fact that she must wear a *décolletée* evening dress, she almost gave it up, saying that the repugnance she felt to doing so, showed she had no business to be going at all.

'No, it doesn't,' said Alizon, curbing a feverish impatience, 'it only shows that, whether you are seen at a ball or not, your heart is where it should be—you haven't the spirit to forget your dead mother in festivity, but you have the will to lay aside

the outward show of your grief, and to come and help your friend, don't you see? Hilda, don't give it up at the last. You have no idea how I have counted upon it.'

Hilda had not a word to answer to this appeal, and she made no further opposition. She would go through the ordeal—for it would be an ordeal—for Alizon's sake. Nay, she began to feel a morbid sense of pleasure in the idea that it would serve as a sort of moral flagellation inflicted upon herself, in punishment for that secret thing which had grown up between them out of Peregrine's levity and her own weakness and fear of inflicting pain on him. For she felt that it was there still, and, as it were, more secret than ever, because silence had been observed about it for a longer time. She had avoided Peregrine with some success since the day he had spoken to her. They had not exchanged a dozen words together by themselves. She saw the time of the holidays drawing nearer to a close, but they would not be over till past the middle of September. If she could contrive to stave off everything until then she would be saved, and Alizon need never know how perilously near she had been to having heard what she ought not to hear. Peregrine could never have the chance of reverting to the subject. Anxious calculations on the matter, and the misery of knowing that her mind contained this secret from Alizon, were combining to make her thin and careworn in look. She had almost forgotten about Harold Ashby, having scarcely seen him since their interview. When she did think of it, it was with a vexed half-laugh, and a wonder whether after all she had not dreamt it.

Thus the days glided by until this eventful one arrived. This morning, as often before, the brother and sisters were together in the dining-room, not long after breakfast.

'There's Miss Blundell coming,' said Letty, suddenly. 'I'm off. I have not time to sit talking to her.'

As a matter of fact, she never did talk to her, but sat in stiff and wooden silence all the time Alizon might be there. The other two smiled as she skimmed out of the room and away to other regions. Hilda went to open the hall-door to greet the visitor.

'I always prided myself on not teasing people by calling at all sorts of inconvenient times,' she said. 'But circumstances alter cases. Is "your Godfrey" in?'

'Yes, at your service,' said Hilda, laughing.

'Ah! I can't help myself this time,' she said, going into the sitting-room and holding out her hand to him. 'And you can help me—very much.'

Godfrey said he was glad to hear it, and asked what shape the help was to take.

'Yes,' said Alizon, flinging herself into a chair near the table, 'I want to speak to you both. You both know—and understand—the accursed thing, and that's saying a great deal. Shall we be interrupted?'

'No; Letty is busy,' said Hilda.

'Good! Then listen to this.'

She drew a letter from her pocket, looked at them both with a hard and sombre expression, and added:

'It is from Miss Smith. Miss Smith only returned to her duties a few days ago. Thankful I am that she is there.'

Then she read:

'My dear Miss Blundell,—I am truly sorry to disturb your mind and worry you—above all by what I cannot prove as facts, however much I may be convinced that they are so. It is my duty, however, to tell you even what I suspect. On my return here the other day I found Mrs. Blundell very restless, unsettled, and dissatisfied. She is also very much embittered by the knowledge that you are having a ball at which she will not be present.'—['Of course; it's all coming just as I expected it would!']—'She has kept saying that *she also* can show people that she knows how to use her freedom. What the "she also" may mean, I cannot even conjecture. I only repeat her words. But, apart from this, I am convinced that there is something seriously wrong in contemplation. It is horrible to have to write it to you, but I must. I find she has been going out a great deal in the evening to her friends the Arrowsmiths. You know I do not like Mrs. Arrowsmith. She is a fast, vulgar woman, though I don't think there is anything really bad in her. But she is very careless about the company she keeps. This, and a thousand other things, which it would be tedious to relate, convince me that Mrs. Blundell has been doing her best to amuse herself, and that—to come to the point with great pain—she has seen a great deal of some gentleman about whom I can hear no details. You will understand that I cannot and will not play the spy upon her. That is not my business, nor my inclination. I simply tell you what has been forced on my attention. The thing which has decided me to write to you, is this: that she says to-morrow night she is going to the Arrowsmiths' to a party—that she does not know what time she may be back, so she will let herself in. And she has had a trunk brought down to her room from

upstairs, and has packed it. I don't know what it means. I cannot tell you what is wrong, but something is, I am sure. I let you know, and it is for you to act in the matter. The children were pleased to see me back. Maudie is well, but Saxon is not, though I hope it is only a passing ailment. They have good dispositions, and I love them, but I am sad for them.

'Yours very truly,

'MARIETTA SMITH.

'P.S.—Since writing this, Mrs. Blundell has informed me that she thinks of going away for a few days with Mrs. Arrowsmith, and that she is going to have her box sent there after she goes to the party. I do not believe a word of it.

'M. S.'

She ceased to read.

Neither of the others spoke till Godfrey, looking at her, said:

'You want me to go?'

'I'm ashamed to inflict it upon you, but I do.'

'I can go, but not early. I happen to be busy now, and the five o'clock train would be the earliest I could travel by.'

'Oh, Godfrey, can't you leave your patients for once, or send some one else to them?' asked Hilda, excitedly.

'No, I have undertaken them, and I must stand by them. It is unfortunate, but I cannot help it.'

'No, you cannot,' said Alizon. 'But most fortunately I don't see that it matters much. It seems to me that if Marietta Smith is right, and there is any foolery of a malignant kind in contemplation, this evening party at Mrs. Arrowsmith's will be the beginning of it. Now an evening party will certainly not begin before seven or eight o'clock, and you would be in plenty of time to be there before she sets out, to find out what is on hand and—nay, I must leave the whole management of it to your discretion, on which I rely absolutely. Find out what you can. Take what steps you think necessary. I shall endorse all that you do. You will miss our far-famed ball?' she added, sardonically. 'I don't know that that will be much loss to you, whatever it may be to us. You see, I can hardly go, however dreadful might be the things that are going to happen at Kirkfence.'

'No, you cannot go,' said Godfrey, who seemed all at once to have taken them and the entire situation into his keeping. 'I will go. I can manage.'

'Well, heaven bless you—or whatever does bless us or curse us,' she said, her face still looking very dark. 'I was going to say I believe it is all a matter of blind chance and there is no such thing as blessing or cursing, but I have not felt so sure of that lately.'

Godfrey said nothing. He now never made any answer to her speeches of this kind, and no one knew what were his views on such matters.

'That is arranged, then,' he said, after a pause, as he rose. He never now seemed wishful to linger awhile in her presence, as he had done at first. 'I have not time to stay here any longer. You may depend upon my doing my best. If you should have any further news, or should find that you don't want me to go, send word. Good-morning.'

He smiled as he shook hands with her.

'Thank you. I shall telegraph to Miss Smith that her letter is attended to. Good-day.'

Godfrey went away. Alizon sat still for a minute or two, and then turned to Hilda, saying, in a voice of not exactly cheerful emotion:

'Hilda, I could never own that I could be afraid of any human being, or of anything at all, except of seeing Peregrine ill and struggling with death, which does reduce me to a jelly of fear and wretchedness, I admit; but I vow that lately your brother has put on such a cold and distant air to me that I am not afraid, but uncomfortable, and given to wondering what he thinks about things. He disapproves of something; I am convinced of it, and it is hard. I wish he would speak out and not look silently rebuking.'

'He doesn't. What nonsense!' said Hilda, with an embarrassed laugh.

'He does. When he first came here, and for ever so long afterwards, I used to see him and tell him about things, and I always felt as if he were such a boy, and I was so much older and wiser, and more skilled and experienced in the world, and everything—except, of course, a little medicine and surgery. As a matter of fact, I believe he's about a year older than I am; he still does all that I ask him to do, but I feel that he is judging me all the time.'

'I don't believe Godfrey ever judged a person unkindly in his life,' said Hilda, with suppressed feeling.

'No, but he may judge them justly, and for some people justice is the most dreadful thing that can be dealt out to them.'

'Who is morbid and distrustful now, I wonder?' said Hilda.

Alizon laughed, and in her usual style seemed to put the whole matter away from her with one gesture.

'We evidently don't agree about it. Now I shall have to say something to Peregrine by way of excuse for your brother's absence. Out upon it! How I hate the meanness of it. I'm over head and ears in preparations for to-night too. Baker is probably cursing me at this moment. Ah, Hilda, what a happy thought! Come and help me with the flowers.'

Hilda went with her, and spent the morning in a wilderness of fragrant blooms. Peregrine did not show. Hilda declined to stay for luncheon, but would get it at home and take a rest in the afternoon, in preparation for the evening's exertions.

She had to break to Letty the fact that Godfrey would not be able to go with them, and that he was going to Kirkfence on a matter of business for Miss Blundell.

'Matter of business for Miss Blundell!' repeated Letty, resentfully. 'I believe she thinks he is no more than her errand-boy. Has he gone to fetch the cakes from the confectioner's?'

'You don't know what you are talking about,' said Hilda, coldly. 'It is well Godfrey has a kinder heart than you have.'

Letty shrugged her shoulders. She was not disposed to view in a charitable light anything connected with Great Undermoor.

She did not, however, say anything more about not going, and even assented when Hilda made the suggestion that they should go early, as Godfrey would not be with them.

CHAPTER XLI.

AT THE BALL.

Hilda and Letty knew scarcely any of the people at the ball, except their own immediate acquaintances—the Blundells, Harold Ashby, and Giles Barras. Yet they quickly excited attention; Letty, at any rate, by her fresh, spirited young beauty. Her card was soon filled with names and hieroglyphics standing against every dance. She had entered into the spirit of the thing, and girl-like, with pardonable delight, had forgotten all else in the excitement of the occasion. That she was in the house of people whom she thoroughly disliked, and

was dancing with their friends over their floors, had quite passed from her mind. It was all delightful. The great quaint ball-room, decorated with flowers, lighted softly and brightly by an abundance of wax candles, the open windows, the balmy night air of late summer, the perfect music, the movement, the rhythm, and one or two super-excellent partners, all combined to make her forget her hatred of 'dressing up,' and the irksomeness of party-going; while deeply underlying it all was the consciousness, not openly acknowledged, but felt, that herself and her doings, her popularity and her performances in general, were being watched carefully and persistently by one particular pair of eyes. All this intoxicated Letty, and she forgot to notice anything outside these influences. 'It is well,' said Hilda to herself, as she watched her with a sad smile. She had done no wrong; had thought no wicked thoughts—let her be happy! She, herself, did not dance at all, but was in the ball-room a good deal, talking to sundry neighbours, to whom she had been introduced by Alizon, and some of whom she found knew Godfrey. Her heart, however, was not in the conversation. During the early part of the evening she could not keep her thoughts from her brother, and the errand which had taken him to Kirkfence. The more she thought of it all, and of the letter of Marietta Smith, the more she felt what cause for uneasiness Alizon had, and what suspense she must be in till to-morrow morning; for it did not seem possible that any news could be had before then.

'She must trust Godfrey very much,' Hilda said to herself, looking across the room to where Alizon stood talking to two of her guests from a distance.

Whatever she felt of fear, trouble, or uneasiness, she showed absolutely nothing. She did not look anxious, or frowning, or *distrait*. With hands lightly folded over her arms, and a fan dangling from her wrist by its silken cord, she stood and talked. Her dress of pale green brocade and filmy costly white lace, the white flowers she wore, and the curious old jewellery of aquamarines and pearls, were, as usual, not calculated to set off her pallid complexion and hair; and, as also was usual, the strong, individual life and spirit in her triumphed over all these disadvantages. Not the most brilliantly coloured woman in the room made her look faded. It was wonderful, thought Hilda, with a sense of proud proprietorship. As she looked, she remembered their conversation of the morning, and the words Alizon had said about Godfrey. Hilda looked at her friend with intense, searching eagerness. She had professed to be uncom-

fortable about Godfrey's manner, and half afraid of him. Hilda smiled. Alizon afraid! Probably she was perfectly well acquainted with Godfrey's devotion to her. When had it begun? In what had it its origin? And, in itself, what did it mean? She knew it could have but one meaning. Godfrey had lifted his eyes high.

'He is in love with her. What a pity!'

Then she began to wonder why it was a pity. It was clearly no moral pity. In mind and character he was Alizon's equal—in some respects her superior. His love was an honour to her, whatever she or the world might think. But what did she think? She never talked about people being ladies and gentlemen, or the reverse. But she must have some standard of what was fitting and equal between her and others, and, for all Godfrey's inward equality or supremacy, his sister repeated to herself, 'It is a pity.'

As she thought this, the music began once more. In a moment the floor was covered with dancers, and she lost sight of Alizon. She sat still, watching the dance; her foot beating time to the wailing, sensuous music of the waltz. She was alone, but she did not mind that. She saw Letty float by again and again with some young man, whom Hilda knew not, but who, she could see, danced exceedingly well. Both he and his partner seemed highly satisfied with one another, and proved it by scarcely standing still during the whole of the dance. At last, however, it was done. The music stopped, the crowd broke up into knots and groups, then gradually thinned away, as they left the room to seek cooler places, for promenading or flirting.

Hilda looked towards the upper end of the room. Alizon was no more to be seen, but Peregrine was there, crossing the room with a lady on his arm—a young married woman, Lady Morecambe by name, who a few years ago, in the height of her youth and beauty and brains and distinction in society, had married a rich *roué* nearly old enough to be her grandfather—a man who was fabulously rich, and who had been fabulously bad until his constitution could no longer stand it.

The young beauty was considered to have made a brilliant match, and was congratulated by all her friends and enemies on her good fortune. She had ever since her marriage availed herself to the utmost of the advantages afforded her by her husband's riches and position in the world, and had made herself noted, and indeed notorious, in the kingdoms of fashion, folly, and fastness in general. She was at home now at her

husband's Yorkshire house, entertaining a great party of friends, some of whom were with her here this evening. She had not been present for more than an hour, and Peregrine had been at her side almost ever since. She pleased, amused, and delighted him. She was talking to him in a low tone now, with her head somewhat down-drooped—that was her style ; a heavy dark beauty, with a low forehead, and sleepy black eyes, masses of dry, rough, black hair dressed in a great knot low down in her neck. She always dressed with splendour rather than airiness. Crimson and gold, trailing draperies and gleaming jewels cunningly disposed, or the far-famed Morecambe pearls, huge in size and numerous of rows, these were the things she affected.

At the first glance she was so magnificent, so languid, not to say slow in her movements, and so superb in her quietness, that people took her to be much older than she was. A nearer inspection soon corrected that false impression. It was realised that the gorgeous creature could not be more than twenty-three or twenty-four, which last, indeed, was her correct age. Contrary to what so frequently happens, she conquered those who approached her nearly far more effectually than those who kept at a distance. It was said to be exactly the same with regard to her conversation and intellect. Those who, as strangers, made their bow and exchanged a few words with her, generally went away with the impression that she was a magnificently beautiful nonentity; those whom fate or fortune allowed to prolong their acquaintance found her more attractive and original each time they saw her. Her chain, scarcely visible at first, became a strong fetter.

The one smallness in her character was that no man, married or single, rich or poor, old or young, handsome or hideous, was too insignificant or too sacred, or too much the property of another, to be indifferent to her. This some of her female friends said was a vulgarity which went far towards the neutralising of her other attractions, but the general feeling was that an enigmatical, a fascinating, and a dangerous woman was embodied in the personality of Sarah, Lady Morecambe.

Hilda would not have known who she was if Alizon had not happened to point her out soon after she had received her, remarking in a casual way that she had better watch her, if she was not dancing and wanted a little amusement.

She saw them now and fixed her eyes upon them. A sharp spasm contracted her heart. They did not see her; Lady Morecambe at any rate did not. Peregrine, at least, seemed as

if he did not. He was bending a little towards his companion; he was much taller than she was, for she did not reach more than medium height, and, as has been said, she generally drooped her head somewhat. It was seldom that she lifted her face and turned her eyes full upon any one. Her detractors said that, when she did, it was with no friendly purpose. Peregrine was smiling a little. They made a contrast and a harmony at once, thought Hilda.

Lady Morecambe moved on in her slow and languid manner, trailing after her a train of some gorgeous tissue. Little glittering stars seemed to stud her here and there, and shone in the coils of her hair. She slowly moved backwards and forwards a huge, feathery, crimson fan. He looked fragile enough, with his slender figure and pale face. But he was evidently pleased, interested, and absorbed, not to say devoted.

Slowly, very slowly, unconscious of or indifferent to the fact that they were observed, they crossed the great room, which at that end had two doors, one at either side. They had come in at one—a door which led from some conservatories and passages—and they went towards the other, which would bring them back to the crowds, the drawing-room, and all the rest of the company. Hilda was not the only person left in the ball-room, though it had been rapidly emptying. She was not, either, the only person who observed the couple as they passed by. In the air around her she heard comments—some low, some loud, laughing, suspicious, cynical. Only one penetrated to her consciousness so that she remembered it. A lady whom she did not know, and who was no longer quite young, stood near to where she sat, with an elderly, keen-faced, distinguished-looking man.

'Those two have been together ever since she came, an hour ago, general,' said the lady.

'Have they? Most natural, I should say. Two more congenial souls could hardly have met together.'

Then they both laughed. Peregrine and his companion passed through the second door and disappeared.

Hilda felt as she had never in her life felt before. She knew not what the emotion was which mastered her, and gave her to taste of a misery bitterer than any she had ever dreamed of. Anger, longing, an aching heart, and a strange turbulent sensation that this was very dreadful, and yet that not to have felt it would perhaps have been more so—all these went surging in an unruly tide through her heart, and then, subsiding a little, left one thing prominent in her consciousness: that Peregrine

after greeting her in the drawing-room, on her arrival with Letty, had not spoken to her, or seemingly seen her since.

She resolutely said to herself, 'It is all right, of course—it is as it should be,' but a wild unhappiness raged within her. She hardly knew what she was thinking of, or where she was. It was doubtless right that he should scarcely speak to her, especially if he had repented him of his words the other day. It was the rational and honourable thing to do. If he had never spoken more to her since she had known him than he had done this night, everything would have been better. She would not have been reduced to feeling herself a guilty wretch every time that Alizon spoke of him to her; she would not have been sitting here now, feeling every thought a pain, and trying unsuccessfully to battle down the longing she felt to know that he had not forgotten her very existence, in the interest of his present flirtation with Lady Morecambe.

She moved restlessly. She could not bear the idea of penetrating alone to the drawing-room, and there most likely confronting a further phase of Peregrine's devotion to the present object of his attentions. Yet she could hardly bear to remain where she was. Had any one been near with whom she was acquainted, she would have asked him to take her away. But there was no one.

Thus debating within herself, she sat almost rigidly still on the bench, her black-robed figure, white shoulders, and pale face and head outlined against the crimson dado which went all round the wall. She was feeling with the intense keenness and absorption which almost paralyses, when, looking up, because of a shadow which obscured her view, she saw Harold Ashby looking at her. She sighed with relief.

'Are you not tired of sitting here?' he asked her, gravely, and in a very every-day sort of tone.

'Yes,' she said, rising. 'I should like to walk about a little, if you don't mind.'

Something told her that she was safe from any repetition of his attentions to her—for the present, at any rate—and anything was better than remaining where she was, with those thoughts.

He gave her his arm, and they moved towards the right-hand door, leading to the conservatory.

'Did you come from the drawing-room?' she asked.

'Yes. Blundell had just come in with this wonderful beauty on his arm. I've seen some of your English beauties, in the Park, at the opera, and at other places at a distance. I never

saw a real noted one close to, before,' said the young man, with candid unfeigned interest. 'I tried hard not to stare at her, but it was not easy to avoid it.'

'And what impression did she produce upon you?' asked Hilda, as carelessly as she could.

'Superb—wonderful—to me! Different from anything I had ever seen before. We have beautiful women in our country—ay, as beautiful as she, but different. She's a woman to look at and wonder at; one to have her picture painted in oils, and carved out of marble; a queen of display, and of everything that is luxurious and unwholesome; but a woman to live with year in and year out—a wife and mother—no!'

'Do you really think that? Or do you say it on the principle that a man should never speak well of one woman to another?' she asked, abruptly; for she had been too much agitated by what she had seen to be able to appear perfectly indifferent.

'No, indeed, I say it from my heart,' said Harold, decisively. 'She looks to me as dangerous as she is beautiful. That is an attraction to lots of people, I know, the gambling, speculating, playing-with-fire kind, but I am preposterously prosaic in my tastes and habits. I never wanted to gamble in my life, and, if I ever displayed a desire to play with fire, it must have been in early infancy, for I can't recollect it.'

She laughed a little, and they passed from the corridor into a conservatory hung with soft-coloured lanterns. There was a cool, aromatic scent in the air; tall feathery ferns and palms spread their branches dimly high up above the lanterns.

'There are seats here. Will you stay, or go into the garden?' he asked her.

'I will stay here,' she said, sinking into a low cushioned chair, and feeling suddenly a great physical weariness—the reaction after her intense though repressed excitement in the ball-room.

'How delicious, after that heated air!' she said, passing her hand over her forehead.

'Isn't it? You looked mighty tired as you sat there. I know that if my sister had been here she would have said, "Harold, are you nothing but a brute that you don't get Miss Noble away from this?" I have an educated eye in the matter of seeing when a lady is tired,' he added, laughing. 'Nesta has taken care of that.'

'I think Godfrey and you have one quality at least in common,' said Hilda, smiling. 'You are both very good to your sisters.'

Before he had time to reply, the conservatory door was opened from the outside, and Alizon stepped in. She looked at them for a moment, and then accosted them.

'It was good of you to come, Mr. Ashby,' she said, in an unwontedly gentle voice. 'Excuse me if I take Miss Noble away from you for just one moment. No, don't go! I only want to say a few words to her. Then I must go back to my duties.'

She linked her arm through that of Hilda, who had risen, and they moved a little away to where Harold could not see them. Alizon paused, laid two hands on Hilda's shoulders, and looked at her with an expression of unutterable grief and weariness—not with her usual scornful defiance of the circumstances which galled and oppressed her.

'Hilda!' she said, and paused, as if she could not trust her voice. 'Oh, Hilda, I wonder what is happening, or what may have happened before now, at Kirkfence. I wonder how your brother has managed for me. I have kept up all the evening until a little while ago. Then I felt I could bear it no longer. I slipped out and went to the fishponds, and walked about for a while; and my heart felt as if it would break, and as if it couldn't carry other people's burdens and my own sins any longer. Perhaps it is because I want my supper,' she added, trying to turn it off with a flippant laugh. 'It is time for it to be served—past midnight—past midnight!' She sighed heavily. 'Who knows,' went on the strong and self-contained creature, giving way for a moment, 'who knows whether he was in time, or whether *his* children's mother has before now done something so mad or so silly that it can never be got over!'

'Godfrey has been in time, I am certain,' said Hilda, in a low firm voice. 'Alizon, do not fret about it. You will hear, as soon as anything can be heard, that all is safe.'

'I hope so,' she replied, lifting her face, which looked old and haggard and drawn. Once more she gazed into Hilda's eyes. Once more she pressed her hands upon her shoulders. 'I expect I look a complete hag?' she said, inquiringly.

'Not exactly. But you don't look as well as you did. Pull yourself up. Don't let any one see *you* downcast. To-morrow, Alizon—be miserable to-morrow, and I'll come and be as miserable as you please with you.'

'Heaven only knows how I should have managed to-night if I hadn't had the feeling all the time that you were near. There, I must not stay any longer. I must see after everything. Peregrine will have enthroned Lady Morecambe and

himself at supper. Did you ever see anything so absurd as the way in which they have been carrying on? At least it would be absurd if it wasn't ghastly. The herd he will have left to fend for themselves. Now I have put on my mask again. Don't stay one moment after you are tired, Hilda.'

She gathered herself up, and, not casting a backward glance, went quickly out: erect, strong, herself again.

Hilda returned to Harold, who with great discretion had turned his back upon them and was drumming with his fingers on the glass door of the conservatory, not so loudly as to have disturbed them, but loudly enough to prevent him from having heard a word of their conversation.

She sat down again.

'Miss Blundell says supper is ready,' she observed. 'Directly afterwards, we must go. I don't want to stay late. I wonder where my sister may be? She has been dancing all night.'

'Wherever she may be, she is being well attended to,' said Ashby, laughing a little.

'What do you mean? By some one in particular?'

'Why, certainly. I mean Mr. Barras. Surely you don't need to have that pointed out to you?' said Harold, a little sarcastically. 'Though I don't know,' he added, a moment afterwards.

'Mr. Barras?' repeated Hilda, mechanically. 'I think I must be mad. I seem to see nothing,' she added, in a tone of annoyance.

'I wonder you have not seen that. I have met Miss Letty out at several places where you were not present, and even before you came to Askley Bridge. But it is within the last few weeks——'

'It is impossible,' said Hilda, uneasily.

In common with many other persons, she had got to look upon Giles Barras as exclusively Alizon's property. If he should have been amusing himself with her little sister, while she had been blindly engrossed in self and in the concerns of self! For suspicious, unhappy thoughts now came more easily into Hilda's mind than any other thoughts.

She begged Harold to take her to the supper-room, and said that she would leave as soon as it was over. The night was so dry and warm that they had walked to the house and should walk back to their own. Harold made no attempt to dissuade her from this resolution, but took her at once to the brilliantly lighted supper-room. The meal was in full swing. Almost the first figure Hilda's eyes fell upon was that of Letty, seated

at a small round table, with Giles Barras and another couple whom they seemed to know. They all seemed to be enjoying themselves very much. Letty's face wore a look of almost solemn happiness, yet she could laugh, too. She was laughing as she looked up and caught Hilda's eyes anxiously fixed upon her. Her expression changed. The colour rose high in her face. Then Giles handed her something, and from the look they exchanged Hilda saw that Harold was right. There was something between them. With a heart full of anxiety she let Harold lead her to a vacant place.

CHAPTER XLII.

TILL THE MORROW.

HILDA was not long in going through the form of eating her supper, and as soon as she had finished she said to Harold:

'Let us go. I want to catch Letty before she leaves the supper-room.'

Harold smiled to himself, with the mental comment that it was easy to shut the stable-door after the steed was stolen. They found Letty still at the same table, but drawing on her gloves again, with Giles standing near her. Hilda arranged with her to join her in the hall after the next dance, which Letty seemed not unwilling to do, despite her evidently keen enjoyment. She took the arm which Giles offered to her, and they walked away. Harold and Hilda followed more slowly.

'You prefer to wait in the hall?' said he. 'Here is a seat. I am sorry I must go away for this dance. I am engaged for it to Miss Moston, and I must look for her. Let me walk home with you, will you? Mr. Barras will escort your sister, I'm sure.'

Hilda assented, and Harold departed. She placed herself on the seat he had found for her, leaned back in it, and sighed deeply. It had been an ordeal, but, thank heaven, it was nearly over.

Nearly perhaps—but not quite.

She remained seated for some minutes, exchanging a word now and then with some one she knew. The sound of music came from the ball-room. People had not all come away from supper. Indeed, from the dining-room, where it had been served, she all at once saw Peregrine emerge, with Lady Morecambe still on his arm. He gave a quick glance in Hilda's

direction—he could not possibly help seeing her—led the beauty to the drawing-room, and evidently disposed of her there by some means, for very soon he returned to the hall, walked up to Hilda, and said, loudly enough for all near to hear him:

'I hear you are going directly, Miss Noble. You are leaving early.'

'It is not so very early, I think,' said Hilda, gravely.

'It was very good of you to come, when you are not dancing,' he said, still in the same audible tone. 'But you must let me send some one with you. It is very dark, though such a short distance to your house.'

'Oh, thank you, Mr. Ashby is coming with me,' she said; and then Peregrine sat down on the broad settee beside her, and smilingly said, in a tone a little lower:

'I hope you haven't been bored to death.'

'No, not bored, certainly,' replied Hilda, feeling that a certain consciousness look and rigid attitude were taking possession of her, and vexed that she could not look as smilingly indifferent as he did.

One or two persons had glanced at them for a moment, had heard Peregrine saying a few words to one of his departing guests, and had thought no more about it. The strains of a most seductive waltz came swelling, now high, now low, from the ball-room. One by one the couples paired off. They were practically alone, as Hilda realised, just in the very spot where she had decided there could be no solitude.

Turning towards her he now said, in a totally different voice:

'I have been watching you. You did not look happy. You were not amused, whether you were bored or not.'

'Was I not?' she said, never relaxing in her gravity, and forcing herself to look straight at him. She would have given much to have had the honest cowardice to get up and walk into the drawing-room.

'No, you were not,' he answered, coolly. 'I ask no reasons. I don't want to tease you. But I want to tell you something. I was determined I would, too, before the evening was over. I've never had a word with you since you first came. I did it on purpose. I wanted to be with you all the time, Hilda—you know it, and you need not look so rigid all at once. It does not matter to me what people say about—some people. But it does matter to me what they say about you. I wasn't going to set every gossiping cat from all the country round speculating as to who that girl was who was letting herself be waited upon by

that abandoned wretch, Peregrine Blundell. Because, of course, they can't understand that a good woman may have seemed like an angel of pity to me, and that I might be thankful for the pity. You know that was what I meant, don't you?' he added, almost in a whisper. 'Both to-night, and before!'

She looked at him. His eyes looked sad—he was not smiling now. The words of indifference died from her lips. If that was what he really meant, then had she indeed misjudged him! Then was there no need for all the heartache, the remorse, and the sense of guilt. Had her own heart been black, and not Peregrine's at all? This, then, was the answer to her doubts and wonders. It made her happy; but, despite its good sound, the happiness was of a wretched, feverish kind—more to be feared, as she felt, than much sorrow.

'You do know, Hilda, don't you?' he persisted.

'I—I—what does it matter?' she said, desperately. 'Why should you need any pity? Do not let us talk about it.'

'Why should I need it?' said Peregrine, with a laugh of derision. 'What a question! I wonder who should need it more. I cannot suspect you of anything unjust or unworthy, or I should have said that you had misunderstood me that day, and avoided me since. You didn't do that?' he continued, persuasively.

'I have avoided you. You got excited, and made yourself ill,' said Hilda, casually wondering over the depth of insincerity into which she was sinking. 'As I said, let us not talk of it.'

'I don't want to "talk of it." I just want that one word—that you understand about it. Surely you will give it to me!'

'I understand—now,' she replied, unsteadily.

'And you will not visit it upon me by avoiding me again, as if I were something unclean?'

'I don't—oh, for pity's sake don't talk in that way!' she exclaimed, in a low voice of anguish; 'it is not fair.'

'But you won't shun me any more?'

'No,' she almost whispered.

'Thank you. That is what I wanted you to promise,' said Peregrine, quietly.

Hilda was conscious that people were moving about them; that the dance was over. Soon she saw Letty and Giles. Peregrine stood by her side as they approached. Then Harold Ashby came up. In a minute or two the girls had on their light shawls, and, with the two men, had passed out of the house, accompanied to the door by Peregrine, who stood within it and called out:

'Barras—and Ashby, too—I shall look for you back again; it is early yet.'

'Yes, yes!' came from them, and then they had left the front of the house, and the lights, and the movement, and were in the dark, under the trees, slowly making their way to Little Undermoor.

'Godfrey left me his key,' said Hilda. 'Hannah will have gone to bed hours ago. Here, Mr. Ashby, open the door for us.'

Harold did so. There was a light in the hall, and they stepped into it, exchanged good-nights, and then the sisters found themselves alone. They fastened the door, and went into the parlour, where again there was a lamp.

'Well,' observed Letty, trying hard to look as if nothing unusual had happened, 'Godfrey is not back yet, so I suppose he will not be till to-morrow. Therefore, we need not wait for him. I believe I am tired now, with all this dancing.'

She made as if to go, but Hilda could not rest till she had solved the question whether her negligence, as she called it to herself, had or had not involved Letty in any unhappy complication.

'One minute, Letty,' she said, gently, forcing a smile—for somehow she felt as if smiling or laughing was the hardest work in the world—'you danced a great deal with Mr. Barras to-night—in fact, you were with him altogether a great deal. Is he a good partner?'

'Oh, very,' replied Letty, constrainedly.

'I don't know whether I am a very competent chaperon. It's an office that is new to me, but——'

'Hilda,' said her sister, her drooping face the colour of a deep-toned wild rose, her nervous fingers twisting themselves in and out of one another, 'I don't know anything—about chaperons. I never thought about it. I feel as if I had been in a dream, and yet I know it is quite true. You say I was a great deal with Mr. Barras. Do you like Mr. Barras?'

She looked up, suddenly and abruptly.

'I have never disliked him—in fact, I have always liked the little I have seen of him. I cannot tell you whether I like him now, until I hear the end of this. I all at once took the alarm, and though I may be a most unsuitable person to preach to you, yet—I must say it—I hope he has not been flirting with you, or——'

'About flirting—I don't know,' said Letty, repressing a little happy laugh. 'He asked me to-night to marry him. At first I did not understand, really. And then I said I would.

I knew all at once that I was very fond of him, and had been for a long time. He's going to see Godfrey to-morrow. Oh, Hilda, I am so happy, and yet——'

She looked up. Hilda's heart swelled almost to breaking with the thankfulness and relief she felt; and with—for the second time that night—a sense of grief and humiliation at her own base and unworthy suspicions of others. How could she ever have doubted Giles Barras? Tears rushed to her eyes, and stood on her cheeks. Her inmost heart forboded evil for herself, and that in the near future, but here at least was an oasis of peace, and love, and happiness, straightforward action and honest feeling.

'Letty dear,' she cried, 'my dear child, how glad I am!'

On hearing which, Letty cast her arms about her sister's neck, and clung to her with tears and kisses, saying:

'Thank God; I have thought sometimes lately that we loved each other less than we used to do.'

'Never, darling! But I have been sad. I am sad, and I shall be sad for a time. Not so sad, though, that I cannot rejoice with you. And, now that I come to think of it, I believe you and Mr. Barras must have been created for each other.'

'That is what he says,' replied Letty, with a beaming smile. 'But how, or when, he found it out, I cannot imagine. He once got me to tell him all my thoughts about town and country, and all that, you know. I said I would rather tend a poultry-yard in the country than be a fine lady in a town. He laughed and asked me if I knew the story of the goose-girl. And to-night we were talking about similar things, and he explained. But though he did explain, very fully, I don't believe I understand it yet.'

'But I do,' said Hilda. 'And it gives me a thankful heart. Come, Letty, we won't sit up any longer. There will be much to think about to-morrow.'

With a deep sigh of assent and consent Letty took her candle in her hand. They went upstairs, and parted at Letty's bedroom door. Hilda kissed her, and stroked her glossy dark plaits with a feeling of yearning tenderness. Was it so, she wondered, that a mother felt towards her daughter? For herself, she felt so old and so separated from Letty. Love, not a similar experience, it was that made her rejoice with the girl.

Letty was soon asleep. There was nothing feverish or unquiet about her happiness, though it was deep. There was no

element in it of distrust or uncertainty. She slumbered in peace to awake to contentment.

Hilda was awake and miserably restless for hours. Her mind was a wild chaos of emotion. In the midst of her happiness there was misery. The recollection of Alizon's caress, of her unwonted softness, and of the appeal wrung from her strong nature to the friend in whom she trusted absolutely, filled Hilda with joy for one instant. In the next she recalled Peregrine's words to her—words which had sounded so well at the moment of hearing them; which had at that moment rebuked her own suspicions, and which she would fain have continued to believe; but which now, separated from the personality of him who uttered them, no longer were convincing. There was something wrong—something fallacious about it all. She applied to it the test which always solved the riddle—would she be willing for Alizon to hear it all, and see it all—all that had passed between them this night? No, a thousand times no; unless she might have been allowed to comment upon, annotate, and explain every word of it. And how could she explain the uneasy delight she had felt in those words? The renewed recollection of Alizon's caress plunged her into an agony of remorse.

'What shall I do?' she muttered, sitting up and wringing her hands in the darkness. 'Shall I go away, and leave them all, or shall I tell her all about it? Oh, I cannot tell her when she already has this heavy burden of trouble, and is in such deadly anxiety—to tell her that he has been making love to me, and cause a quarrel between them. Would she not have the right to say, "You might have managed this without troubling me with it"? Cowardly, weak, and miserable beyond description! That is quite impossible. I shall have to be strong. She must never know of this. There is but a short time. If he opens his lips about it again, I will get up and walk away. Because he does not really care. It is nothing deep with him. But—his sister's friend—his friend's sister! . . . . I cannot leave her now. She will send for me in the morning, I am certain, when she has heard from Godfrey. It would look well, indeed, if I answered that I was going away, and could not go to her. What can I do if he approaches that subject again? Say I will tell my brother that he is behaving dishonourably?' Her face flamed. 'That would stop him, I suppose. But oh, how it would hurt him! I could not—could not do it. Oh, Peregrine! How I wish I had never seen him!'

Hours, which ought to have been spent in tranquil slumber

given up to this kind of tormented mental debate, did not form the best kind of preparation for the morrow. It was long past daylight before the most broken and unrefreshing sleep visited her eyes, and with the sound of Hannah moving about the house she was awake again. When she rose, drew up her blind, and looked at herself, she saw a white, tired face—black rings under her eyes—no sign of rest or refreshment. But she dressed and went downstairs, to find Letty in the dining-room, looking as fresh and trim as possible; turning over the letters which had just arrived, and remarking that there was nothing from Godfrey.

'No. Godfrey went on Alizon's business. I suppose he will let her know about it.'

Indeed, breakfast was hardly over before, as Hilda had expected, one of the Great Undermoor servants called, with a note for her.

'Come down and see me, as soon as you can, if you are not too tired. The worst seems to have been averted. I will tell you all when we meet.'

Directly afterwards came a telegram from Godfrey:

'*Home by twelve o'clock. Have wired to Moorside.*'

'Thank heaven!' ejaculated Hilda.

'Well, I don't know what it's all about,' said Letty, discontentedly. 'I hate such mysteries. It seems to me that things are all wrong somewhere. But I am glad he will be home by twelve o'clock, and I hope he will be able to see Mr. Barras when he comes.'

'Oh, he will receive Mr. Barras. Happy business, where people are all of one mind, is soon settled,' said Hilda, forcing a smile again. 'It is nearly ten o'clock. I shall go now to Great Undermoor.'

She put on her hat, and took her way thither. All was in confusion in front of the house. Carts and a lorry were waiting to take away the rout seats and decorations, and masses of flowers, and plants were being removed. There was a desolate, dismantled air over everything. Baker, who was giving directions, saw Hilda, and came forward.

'Miss Blundell expected you, ma'am. She is upstairs, if you will come this way.'

He took her to Alizon's own sitting-room; a queerly furnished den in a remote part of the house. There Hilda found, what she had never seen before, her friend in *déshabille*, attired in a dressing-gown, and with the remains of her breakfast standing on the table.

'This is something new,' said Hilda, laughing.

'Yes, I admit it. I ordered my breakfast here because there is such a horrid mess downstairs, and because I disapprove of it, and hate it all so thoroughly. And I put on a dressing-gown because I was tired, and got up late. Now, then! I suppose I may do that if I like?'

'I suppose you may. What have you heard? We had a message from Godfrey that he would be home by twelve.'

'I heard this as soon as I could hear!' said Alizon, putting a telegram into Hilda's hands.

'*Danger over. Will call and report on my way home.*'

'A capital message!' said Alizon, looking pleased. 'Askley Bridge is a nest of gossip. Every one will know of my telegram, and every one will think that he has been attending some person in whom I am interested, who has been seriously ill.'

'It is a good message. But of course you are very anxious to know what lies behind it all.'

'Of course I am. He will call on his way from the train. That will be within an hour. I must be ready to receive him, and you will stay with me till he comes, won't you?'

'Certainly. I wish there was anything I could do.'

'Let us talk about the party last night,' said Alizon, with a grim smile. 'Do you know Lady Morecambe was furious because Peregrine left her suddenly in the drawing-room, *plantée là*, without any one to wait upon her, and hurried off to speak to some one? I found afterwards that he was saying good-bye to *you*. Wasn't it a joke?' she cried, with a hearty laugh. 'I was most polite to her, but she only looked at me from under her eyelids, with a kind of superb dislike, and said how very tiring balls in the country always were. How I enjoyed it!'

Hilda smiled constrainedly.

'She is very beautiful,' she said. 'A kind of empress in her way. I daresay she cannot understand that there are homely people who would not be empresses of that kind if they could.'

'Well said! No, I am sure she does not understand any such thing, and would not believe it if it were told to her. She would say the grapes were sour. Now, if you'll excuse me for one minute, I will put on a gown and return to you. The moments fly. I wish it was over.'

Almost before she had returned, looking her old self again, in her dark serge gown, Baker had once more presented himself to say that Dr. Noble was in the library, and waiting to see her.

'I must see him alone,' said Alizon, as they went downstairs. 'But I'll see you again to-day, Hilda, unless I find my whole time is taken up by having to take fresh measures for keeping things straight. Perhaps having to go to Kirkfence again. Oh, Lord! Because the catastrophe has been averted, it does not follow that we are at the end of our difficulties.'

They parted. Hilda walked out at the open hall-door; Alizon entered the library.

CHAPTER XLIII.

AT KIRKFENCE.

GODFREY had had an unusually busy day up to the time when he left home for the station. He just caught his train to Kirkfence, and it was not until he had been [illegible] in his place, and moving on for some minutes, th[illegible] to reflect seriously upon the nature of the er[illegible]dertaken. During the day he had had no tim[illegible] at all. It was a very disagreeable errand, there was no doubt of that. Was he to brutally tell Nelly that suspicions had be[illegible] upon her conduct, and that he had come to find out the m[illegible] ing of it all? No; he bethought himself of a better plan th[illegible] that. She had herself, not many months ago, given him cordial invitation to visit her if he should ever come to Kirkfence, and that was a pretext which would make the beginning of the interview, at any rate, easy. Beyond arranging for that beginning, he was not going to trouble himself about it. The rest would arrange itself. He was tired, leaned back and closed his eyes, and not having any company in the carriage, and soothed by the rumbling of the train, he was almost asleep when at last they arrived at Kirkfence. He saw then, by the big station clock, that it was nearly six o'clock. The five o'clock train was a slow one. He got into a hansom, and gave the address of Nelly's house. He was driven there, over the same road which Alizon had so often and so wearily traversed.

It was still broad daylight when he arrived at the house. He told his driver to wait for a time, not knowing what proceedings he might have to take next, but ardently hoping that the whole thing might turn out a false alarm. Perhaps he might even get back to Askley Bridge to-night.

'Was Mrs. Blundell at home?' he asked. She was not, it

seemed. She had been out all day, at a picnic, and perhaps might not return that night—she had spoken of going away with some friends in the evening. On hearing this, Godfrey felt that things were beginning to look bad, so he asked to see Miss Smith, and the servant—the broad-spoken Yorkshire woman—eyeing him curiously as he displayed such a—to her—startling acquaintance with the inmates of the house, admitted cautiously that Miss Smith was at home, and let him in. He gave her his card, writing below his name, 'On Miss Blundell's behalf,' and in a very few moments he was confronted by the conscientious Miss Smith, looking harassed, anxious, and full of uneasiness.

'You come from Miss Blundell?' she said, looking at his card, which she was twisting about in her fingers.

'Yes,' he told her, feeling that it would be foolish to beat about the bush with her. 'Your letter made Miss Blundell uneasy. She was quite unable to leave the house herself, so she sent me [illegible] have given her a little help before in this matter, and [illegible] Mrs. Blundell. But the woman says she is out [illegible] of an evening-party.'

'Yes,' [illegible] looking very unhappy. 'I spoke of what I knew. I am not up to all these horrible deceptions and [illegible] But what has happened since has confirmed all my [illegible] that there is something seriously wrong. Until this [illegible]ning I was under the impression that Mrs. Blundell was [illegible]ng to an evening-party. She had said so all along, and I believed her. Not till nine o'clock did she say that it was, on the contrary, a picnic, and that she had to be ready at a quarter-past ten, when some of the party would call for her. At first I felt relieved, because picnics, which begin early, are not often kept up late. But then came what horrified and alarmed me so much. She said she was not coming home to-night. I spoke to her as I had never done before. I asked her where she was going, if she was not coming home. She said to H——. A lot of them were going to put up at one of the hotels there, and she meant to go with them; she was not coming humdrumming home just when all the fun would be beginning. They were going to dance. She had made her arrangements, and had packed her ball-dress in a trunk in her room. She should order a cab to call for it and to meet the nine-forty train at Kirkfence. It was the one they would come back by; and there was one on to H—— in a few minutes. Then I knew that she was going to do something dreadful. I said:

'"Mrs. Blundell, do you mean to tell me that you are going to be all day at a picnic, and then, after getting to H—— at half-past ten, you are going to dress yourself up and begin to dance? There's not a respectable hotel in the place where such a thing would be allowed."

'I was trembling so that I could scarcely stand. She saw she had made a mistake, and tried to laugh it off.

'"It is late for dancing to begin, isn't it?" she said. "But, dancing or no dancing, I'm going on to H——. There will be a party of us, and supper is ordered there, and I'm not going to miss it. If my husband can have a ball, to which I am not good enough to be asked, and can keep it up till all hours of the night, as I hear he is going to do, I may also amuse myself a little, and what's more, Miss Smith, *I'm going to.*"—She is dreadfully uneducated, you know.—"So don't you bother me, or yourself, about it any more." And she was turning to go, when I summoned up all my strength and said:

'"Mrs. Blundell, I must believe what you say,"—though I didn't, you know, not a word—"that you are determined to have a little amusement; but oh! let it be amusement, and not anything worse. Think of your little children, and of all you'll forfeit if you get yourself for one instant compromised. Oh, do give up this going to H——, and return home."

'She laughed at first, and said:

'"You silly old maid, you take alarm when there is no reason for any." Then, all at once she set her teeth, and looked at me, and said: "You need not be suspicious, but, if there were any cause for it, haven't I reason enough on my side for going wrong? Why should my husband be allowed to have a ball and shut me out, his lawful wife, from it? Why should he be allowed to amuse himself and make love to a girl, as I have been doing?"—ay, you may well turn pale, Mr[illegible]ok shocked, it is horrible—"and be none the wors[illegible]e I must not even speak to anyone outside my own [illegible]. It would serve him right," she said, "if I took some [illegible] with me who is not ashamed to be known as my friend, and walk into his house just as the party is at its height."—I knew she would not do that; she has not the courage. But, after all, there is something in what she said.—"You look after the children," she said then. "I'm going to give them a lesson, that's all, both him and my sister-in-law; and nothing that you can say shall hinder me."

'She was beautifully dressed, and she evidently considered it a great occasion. Her friends came for her, and she went off

with them. That is all I know, but it is more than enough,' said Miss Smith, sinking exhausted upon a sofa, and putting her handkerchief to her eyes.

Godfrey quite agreed with her. It was more than enough, indeed. Miss Smith wept silently for a few minutes, and then looked up.

'What can be done?' she asked.

'Oh, there is but one thing to be done, and I will do it. Tell me—have you any idea with whom she intended to go to H——?'

'I don't know his name. I can hardly tell you how I know which of these people she meets it is. But he is a young fellow who goes a great deal to the Arrowsmiths'. He must be younger than herself, from the way she used to talk about him at first as "that boy."'

'Humph!' said Godfrey, consulting his watch. 'The box is really ready to go?' he asked.

'Yes, it is. And I am certain there is no ball-dress in it at all. It is much too heavy for a ball-dress to be in it. And besides, I got so desperate and so alarmed that I went to her wardrobe and looked. One or two of her favourite dresses are missing.'

'Very well. There is but one course to be pursued. When the cab comes for the box, you will of course not give it up. Pay the man what he asks, and say that the orders have been countermanded, and that Mrs. Blundell will return home to-night. I shall go to the station, and meet each train that comes in from ——, in case she should come by an earlier one. If they have not altered their plans, I shall see them, and if I see them, I think I may say I will bring Mrs. Blundell back here to-night. Have her room ready, and don't say anything to her about it unless she first speaks of [illegible] Behave as if nothing unusual had happened. It [illegible]ght after that. The thing will be effectually b[illegible]atever it may have been.'

'But suppose they have changed their plans? [illegible]ppose this picnic was merely a blind, and that you should not meet them?' Miss Smith said, in a low voice full of apprehension.

'In that case, we can do no more. She will have to take the consequences of her course of action. In any case, I will return here and tell you, and when Miss Blundell has been informed in the matter, she will decide upon any further measures. Now I had better return to the station as quickly as possible. Good-evening, for the present.'

Miss Smith accompanied him to the door, wished him good-evening, and he got himself conveyed to the station again. As he drove thither he revolved the situation in his mind, and his distaste for everything connected with it increased the more he considered it. What if Nelly and her admirer should arrive, accompanied by the whole body of picnickers? What if her story should be true, and ever so many of them should really be going to H—— for a few days' amusement? By what earthly right could he step forward and separate her from them, and show them all that scandal had been suspected, if not intended?

'Bah! I'm getting nervous, or over-excited, or something. Odious or not, I've got to play my part. It will be detestable if she does come with the whole crew. But it will be tragic beyond hope of salvation for her if she should not come at all.'

Thus bracing himself by, as it were, mentally pitting one painful alternative against another, he found that his cab had drawn up before the station before he was aware how far he had come. He dismissed it, and went inside the building. On inquiry, he found there was no train to come in from the place where the picnic was to be before nine-forty. It was now nearly nine, for Nelly's house was a long way out of town. There was nothing to be done, but to wait till it came in; and his waiting took the form of a restless pacing to and fro on the platform near which the train was expected to arrive.

He reflected upon the present proceedings at Undermoor. Soon the ball would begin. He seemed to see there all those in whom he took an interest—his sisters—Alizon. She had told him he would miss nothing by not being present. It was a fact that she had not for one moment imagined that it would be a severe disappointment to him not to see her. Then, the cause of all the present misery, and the instigator of the entertainm[illegible] his ease, making himself agreeable to the pretti[illegible]wise most noticeable woman present; knowing n[illegible]ny rate caring nothing for, this disturbance tha[illegible]using—ready with his laugh, his scoff, his compliment[illegible]is shrug of the shoulders. Godfrey shook himself angrily.

'By George, he is a bad fellow at bottom, I'm certain—morally rotten! What can you do with or for such a creature? There are things that can't be mended, and he is one of them, I believe. What was that Miss Smith said his wife had declared? That he was amusing himself, and making love to a girl. Good heavens! How do such things get known? Is it servants' gossip? Or are there scandalmongers who spy

out these things? She must know of this. If I have to speak with brutal plainness, I shall tell her of it. It is incredible to me how she can tolerate him, knowing even what she does about him. She is a changed girl—my sister, Hilda. Why, she never used to look at a man, except with a little contempt. I've seen her pass by some very decent fellows—ignore them, not see them, and be palpably interested in something else that the most good-natured man would have been galled by it. And she has succumbed to the influence of this good-for-nothing. No, not succumbed,'—he frowned vexedly over his own admission of such a possibility—'but he has found out the soft place in her heart, and partly for his sister's sake, and partly not to cross him, she is running it very close. Yes, I must speak to her. It will be better to speak out, and tell her what I have heard. But——'

Time had flown, in his vexed and uneasy reverie. Looking up, he saw just outside the station the lights of an approaching train. He walked up to the barrier, and placed himself beside the gate at which stood a porter taking tickets. Through the gates of this barrier all the passengers of that train must pass. If Nelly were of their number, there was no possibility of missing her.

Undoubtedly these groups and knots of men and gaily dressed maidens in light summer raiment, their shoulders covered with shawls and wraps, looked uncommonly like returning pleasure-seekers. They had nearly all the unmistakable stamp of the tribe—the erstwhile crisp and fresh costumes of cotton and muslin somewhat limp and soiled, the faces tired, but, generally speaking, contented, the laughs, and allusions to what had passed, offers to convey each other as far as they were going, and the like. They streamed out, but he saw nothing of Nelly. Where was s[illegible] mbers were thinning considerably, but she came n[illegible]

All the time that he was eagerly lo[illegible]er, he had time to notice that not a word was said b[illegible]em about going on to H——. All the party seemed on[illegible]ious to get home as soon as possible after the day's pleasuring. Then, for a moment, his heart beat quickly. What if, leaving the others earlier in the day, they—she and he, whoever he might be—should really have gone to H——, and should not be coming back at all! To have missed them by so narrow a chance! In some ways Nelly's plot had been transparently clumsy and stupid. In other respects it was, whether by accident or design, cleverly enough arranged. The pretence, kept up to

the last moment, that she was going to an evening-party, was the piece of deceit on which their intervention would have been wrecked, if he missed her. Then he remembered the order about the trunk being called for, and took courage again. Nelly was a vain and frivolous creature. She would not go to H——, or anywhere else, without some suitable plumage in which to flaunt.

'Ha!' he whispered to himself, at last. 'She must have hung behind on purpose.'

Four persons were coming towards the barrier; two men and two women. The first couple consisted of a handsome but vulgar-looking woman, apparently some thirty-five years of age. A man, younger than herself, was with her. At the barrier she turned, and said, in a loud and hearty voice:

'Mrs. Blundell, you'd better let Reynold go quickly and see after that luggage of yours. We haven't too much time to spare.'

'Oh, it will be all right,' said the voice of Nelly Blundell, which Godfrey instantly recognised. This was uncommonly disagreeable; he felt it was quite evident that there was some question of going on somewhere, whether to H——, or to any other place. She was not going without company. He began to suspect now, that it was perhaps nothing more than a very vulgar 'lark,' but his course was none the less plain before him. He let the two first comers pass through the barrier. He let Nelly and her companion give up their tickets. He heard her say:

'I'll go with Mrs. Arrowsmith, Reynold, and take our tickets, if you go and see to the luggage.'

'All right,' was the reply, and then Godfrey for the first time looked attentively at the young man—he was a very young man—and almost gasped.

'Reyn[illegible] he said to himself. 'Good Lord! The unhappy [illegible]r! I'll send him about his business pretty qu[illegible]w.'

He had recognised a former fellow-student, a lad some three or four years younger than himself, who had passed his preliminary not long before Godfrey had taken his degree, and of whose circumstances he knew something. The pair were too absorbed in their present business to notice him. He waited till they had got well out of the barrier, and the other couple had proceeded some paces ahead, and then stepping forward, he placed himself directly in front of them.

'Mrs. Blundell,' he said, taking off his hat, 'I have the

honour to wish you good-evening. Will you be kind enough to spare me a few minutes of your time?'

Nelly stopped short, stared for a moment, and then with a deep blush of anger and confusion combined, exclaimed:

'Dr. Noble!'

The young man stared too. His jaw dropped; utter embarrassment seemed to paralyse him, but at last he too ejaculated feebly:

'Noble!'

After this, for a moment or two, they both stood still and looked at him, too much confounded to speak.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE END OF THE EPISODE.

GODFREY did not speak, but continued to stand, hat in hand, apparently waiting for a reply to his request. He wisely judged that it would be better to wait and let them give him a cue, rather than by undue precipitancy to furnish them with one.

Nelly was of course the first of the two to recover her power of speech. In a voice trembling with anger, and perhaps with some apprehension as well, she said:

'I'm sorry I can't speak to you now. It is late and we are in a hurry to catch the train to H——, with our friends. Good-night! Reynold, see after that luggage, do! The cab should be waiting.'

'The cab which you ordered is not there, but there are plenty of others waiting, and in one of them [illegible]home. As for the luggage you speak of, it is us[illegible] to go and look after it. When you get home yo[illegible] standing where you left it,' said Godfrey, calmly.

'What does this mean?' she demanded, in st[illegible]n, furious anger. Then turning to her companion: 'Reyno[illegible]d, are you turned stupid that you stand there and let me be spoken to in this manner, by this most impudent man? Come aw[illegible]ay with me at once. I don't believe a word of what he says. How dare you interfere in my concerns?' she added, as the last Parthian shaft at Godfrey, from whom it fell ineffectual.

Her companion was staring at him as if fascinated. He had been attached to him, and grateful when, as a youngster and a

beginner, he had received many a hint and many a bit of help to his very commonplace intelligence from the acuter brain of Godfrey Noble. The latter began to realise, with a thankful heart, that in some respects his task would be easier than at first he had expected. He felt quite sure of Reynold Harrison. The difficulty would be with Nelly.

'I—I——' began young Harrison.

At this juncture the man who had been with Mrs. Arrowsmith came back, looked at the group, and said:

'Aren't you coming on? Because we shall only catch the train by the skin of our teeth, anyhow.'

A deep flush crossed Nelly's face as she said, coldly:

'There has been some mistake about my luggage, I find. It has not come. I don't see how I am to go without it.'

'Mrs. Blundell is wanted at home,' said Godfrey, composedly. 'Her little boy is ill and I have come to take her to him.'

'Oh,' said he with a laugh, 'then I guess we shall have to go on by ourselves. Well, it's all the better you don't come, Mrs. Blundell, if you'll take my word for it,' he added, with a kind of amused, reprobate good-nature. 'We ain't exactly the set to suit you. Good-night.'

Without noticing Reynold Harrison, of whose presence he hardly seemed aware, he—not lifted, but touched—his hat, and ran back to his companion.

'I've something to say to you, Reynold, by-the-by,' observed Godfrey. 'I should think you would see the force of going quietly home to-night. As for you, madam,' he added, very gravely to Nelly, 'you must surely understand, from what I have said, that I have been at your house and am acquainted with your movements——'

'I suppose *she* sent you to spy upon me,' said Nelly, almost choking with rage and fright.

Not heeding this he continued:

'I found your little son ill in bed, and your companion, Miss Smith, almost beside herself with apprehension as to what you were going to do. What end could you possibly propose to gain by compromising yourself in this manner?' he went on, in a gentler voice. 'Whom did you expect to hurt or injure except yourself and your little children?'

Nelly was now crying tempestuously, though not loudly. They gradually moved away from the barrier to a deserted platform, and no one was near them or noticing them.

'There's no use in sermonising,' pursued Godfrey. 'I must have three words with my friend here, in private, and then I

will do myself the honour of taking you home again. Will you sit on this bench, or shall I take you to the waiting-room?'

'Reynold!' she said, sharply, her face convulsed with anger, 'are you a man or are you a cur? Are you going to leave me in the hands of this—this *creature*—or are you going to take me home yourself, after I have been insulted in this manner?'

The young man plunged his hands into his pockets, kicked his heel on the ground, looked the picture of hang-dog misery, and at last, not looking at her, muttered:

'I'll be hanged if I go another step with you, either home or anywhere else.'

'That will do,' said Godfrey, with a slight smile. 'Allow me!'

He took Nelly's arm, for she began to sway unsteadily, led her to the bench which stood against a wall hard by, and stood beside her for a minute. He saw she was not going to faint—her anger was too lively to allow of that—but her eyes were closed, her lips twitched.

'Don't disturb yourself—the danger is all over now,' said Godfrey, speaking much as if there had been a false alarm of an accident. 'I want to speak to Harrison before he goes away.'

Once more going up to young Harrison, who was perfectly passive and perfectly miserable, he led him a little aside, and, when they were quite out of Nelly's hearing, it was in a stern voice that he spoke to him.

'What is the meaning of this idiotic escapade?' he asked. 'Have you nothing better to do with your time than go in for such rot as this?'

'Noble, don't! I've been perfectly miserable for days past. She told me all her wrongs, and how she was shut out from all she ought to have, and——'

'So you thought to do her a benefit by compromising her hopelessly, and perhaps smashing up all your own future career by making such a blazing ass of yourself just at the outset! Answer me this,' he added, dropping his voice, but speaking very distinctly, 'look me in the face, answer me straight—how far has this gone? I've told her I will take her home. *Can* I take her back—to her home and her little children? No lies about it!'

'You can—my God, yes, you can!' said the lad, turning white as ashes, and shivering. 'What a question! Ugh! what a fool I have been! What I tell you is gospel-true,' he added, looking Godfrey right in the eyes. 'We were only going over to H—— with the others for a lark—that was all.

For the matter of that, I could take her into my mother's drawing-room. She would not like her, but it would be all right.'

'All right!' echoed Godfrey, scornfully. 'In other words, you've escaped by a hair's-breadth from having made a hopeless fool of yourself, and ruined her reputation. What are the people, and who are they, to whom you were going?'

'Mrs. Arrowsmith knows them. She was going to that fellow's sister. I believe she will get married to him before long.'

'And Mrs. Blundell.'

'She—well, she would have had to go to an hotel, I suppose, the same as myself,' said Harrison, uncomfortably.

'I see. You are advancing, I perceive. I must congratulate you. There's something quite French about it.'

'You must be fair. If you'll come to my rooms, after you've taken her home, I'll tell you the whole story. I'm not all to blame. Will you come?'

'Yes—under the circumstances. Give me the address.'

'Are you staying at Kirkfence? How did you get here?' asked young Harrison, almost ready to be sprightly, now that the strain was removed under which he had been suffering.

'I'm living at Askley Bridge. I shall have to stay here to-night, though.'

'Then you'll sleep at my diggings,' he exclaimed, eagerly. 'Then I shall know that you believe me, and that it's all right.'

'Oh, I believe you are sincere, but as for its being all right——' he looked in the direction of the bench where Nelly sat crouched together, and did not finish his sentence.

Young Harrison flushed, and muttered something beneath his breath.

'Need I speak to her again?'

'Certainly not. Tell me where you live, and go there as fast as you can. It will be late before I can get to you.'

'Never mind how late,' said Reynold, giving him a card with his name and address. 'I shall expect you,' he added; and, with a further glance in Nelly's direction, he took himself off.

Godfrey returned to her.

'Now, Mrs. Blundell,' he said, in a low voice.

She rose, her eyes were almost closed, but she saw him. In utter silence she took his proffered arm with one hand, while with the other she drew the veil over her face. He took her to the outside of the station, put her into a cab, followed her,

and they drove out of town. For the third time that day he travelled over the road which had become detestable to him; once again it must be traversed before his work was done.

Nelly huddled herself into a corner, as far away from him as possible. He forbore to speak to her or notice her. His mind was thronged with burning thoughts of pity, of sorrow, of indignation. A silly woman and a selfish one. A vain, a shallow, a would-be bad woman. It would have been all too easy for her to have become quite bad if once she had entered upon that road. But who was answerable for it all? Who, for his pleasure, his passion, and his caprice, had lifted her out of her place, and when pleasure was over, passion satisfied, caprice disgusted, had flung her aside as if no fragment of a man's heart beat in his breast?

As they drove along in the darkness, and he felt in every fibre that she was hating him intensely for being the witness and the instrument of her defeat and humiliation, his anger against Peregrine Blundell rose to a perfect white heat—to a silent fury, as he pictured him—he knew his demeanour now, so well—graceful and gracious, smiling, amiable and profoundly selfish—and felt, rather than saw, the crushed, defiled—for she was defiled morally—defeated creature by his side. A great pity seized and almost oppressed him. Perhaps it was misplaced. Perhaps she could never have appreciated it, or the depth of the heart that felt it. Be that as it might, it was there. His nature did not lose its profoundness because hers was thin and weak and shallow. It filled his whole being, so that he could think of nothing else.

As he found that they were nearing their destination, he forced himself to speak.

'Mrs. Blundell!'

No answer.

'I don't want you to speak. Do you hear me?'

A slight movement gave assent.

'When you get home, all will be ready for you as if you never intended to go away. You need not speak to any one. I shall not say a word of this. I shall tell Miss Smith you are tired, and want to go to bed. I shall say good-night to you, and leave you. Will that suit you?'

'Yes,' she whispered.

'Very good!' said he; and was silent.

Suddenly she sat up, gathered herself together, and said, in a hoarse whisper:

'Dr. Noble!'

'Yes?'

'You've seen the very worst I ever did or thought of. It was because I was mad with vexation and being so unjustly treated. She ground her teeth together. 'I was going to do it, just that it might be disagreeable for them to hear of. I'm not a bad woman. I don't care one straw for that silly young Harrison. I wanted to break loose, and show them something—that was all. As for them at Undermoor, I don't care if they thought it was ten times worse. They've heard something, and made the very worst of it, it seems. They are so kind and charitable. But you won't think worse of me than I deserve, will you?'

'I do not think ill of you. I feel the greatest sorrow for the unhappiness which has upset your judgment so terribly.'

'Suppose I were to meet you walking with—say, your sister, would you hurry her by and not look at me? Would you let her shake hands with me?'

For a second he hesitated, and in that second recollected Hilda, her white face, her changed demeanour, and he felt a load like lead settle on his heart. Not Hilda! He would not think of Hilda. He would think of Letty, in her innocence.

'I would,' he said, decisively. 'Because misery has driven you to wrong thoughts, and the knowledge of what you have escaped will, I am sure, bring you back to right ones.'

'Oh, oh!' said Nelly, and burst into a storm of silent sobbing and weeping. 'I haven't a friend,' he heard her say, once or twice. 'I haven't a friend.'

He said nothing, but let her sob on without interfering. The whole scene was indescribably painful to him, and the worst part of the pain was that he was unable to dissociate himself and his from the sense of brooding unhappiness and coming disaster which oppressed him.

Nelly, by some means, seemed to know when they were close at home. She restrained herself, sat up, once more drew down her veil, and was quite composed when they stopped before her own gate, and he handed her out.

Once in the house, it was as he had arranged with her. He said to Miss Smith that she was very tired, and would go to her own room. Without entering any of the downstairs rooms, and with a curt good-bye to Godfrey, she walked upstairs.

'She will stay at home now,' he said to Miss Smith. 'Has she no relations?—no people of her own?' he added, as a sudden thought struck him. 'Has she no mother?'

'No, her mother is dead. Her father is living, I believe, but he isn't worth much. When he wants help or money he remembers her, and comes and asks for it. She has a sister, I think, who is in a situation, such as her own used to be. No, she is really very much alone.'

'I fear she is. It is a pity there is no woman who cares for her, to go to her now, poor thing!' said he.

If this were intended as a hint to Miss Smith, it was ineffectual.

'It is of no use my speaking to her,' she said. 'We don't agree, and it only makes her cross. But I hope,' she added, 'that some one will soon be coming to see her. I really don't feel as if I could stand much more of this sort of thing. I can teach the children, and do my best for them, poor little things! And I can put up with her most uncongenial society and conversation, for their sakes, and because they certainly pay me a very good salary. But I can't be the keeper of a flighty wife. I was not cut out for any such purpose.'

'Of course you will hear something very soon,' said Godfrey. 'Do the best you can for her, till something is decided. Things will have to be settled somehow, soon.'

Then he wished her good-night, and got himself out of the house and into his cab again, this time giving the address of Reynold Harrison's lodgings.

It is needless to go in detail into his interview with his quondam fellow-student. He found him expecting him eagerly yet apprehensively—very much ashamed of himself, but yet more relieved than ashamed at the turn things had taken. In the course of a long conversation he learned the whole story. The two had met at Mrs. Arrowsmith's, whither Harrison had been taken by one of the hospital doctors, an anything but desirable associate for him. In his youthful ignorance and love of amusement he had imagined fondly that the kind of thing that went on at Mrs. Arrowsmith's—late suppers, a much greater number of men than women, much talk about actors and actresses, some acquaintance with what went on behind the scenes, and an entire absence of the 'young person' element—constituted 'life,' and that he was seeing the world in excellent style.

Very soon he had met Nelly there, and had been dazzled by her very *prononcée* style of beauty, and immensely flattered by her kind notice of himself. They had gradually grown more and more intimate, till by degrees he had heard the whole story of her wrongs—her blighted life, her false position, and all the

rest of it. They had been almost inseparable, and there had been a pretty hot flirtation, evidently, but Godfrey was glad to find that it had all been carried on at Mrs. Arrowsmith's and other houses. Nelly had had the decency not to introduce her admirers into her own house, or into the presence of Miss Smith and her children.

Apparently there had been no thought of anything more than a flirtation, until the news came of the ball which was to be given at Undermoor, which news made Nelly almost beside herself with anger. She could think of nothing else, talk of nothing else. She had revolved in her mind a thousand schemes for making herself felt in the matter. None seemed to hold out any promise of effectiveness except that of going over to Undermoor and presenting herself at the festivity. She was a coward. She could not do that, though she longed exceedingly after it. Then came the proposed expedition to H——, the occasion of which consisted in some races which were being held in the neighbourhood. The very thing. A few days' amusement, a certain Bohemianism and riskiness about it—but the presence of Mrs. Arrowsmith, who did not care what she said or did, so long as she startled people and attracted attention, and whose bark, it must be confessed, was much worse than her bite.

To do this alarming lady justice, she had tried to dissuade Nelly from joining this expedition, assuring her that the people would not interest her, and that it was not so much a matter of pretty frocks and compliments as of the making of books, and racing business in general—of which business Mrs. Arrowsmith flattered herself that she knew something. At any other time Nelly would have been overruled by her, but on this occasion she was bent on doing *something*, and nothing else offered itself. She was sure that if Alizon could know of it beforehand she would move heaven and earth to prevent her from going. That was enough. She would go. Reynold Harrison would be a useful appendage, and he also was pleased at the idea of being one of a party who had some interest in the races. It was decided that they should go, as arranged, after the picnic.

For some days before this event came off, Reynold had felt himself a hero, and a person of the utmost importance. Then as the situation gradually unfolded, and he found that not only would he and Nelly have to put up at an hotel, in a fashion which, to say the least, would look equivocal, but, also that the expedition would be a very expensive one, he felt all the attrac-

tions vanish which it had ever had for him; he got more and more down on his luck, as he told Godfrey, in having got entangled in such a thing, and the whole affair sickened him. He could scarcely bear to look at Nelly; his heart failed him all round, but, having got himself into this frightful mess, he had seen no way at all, as a man of honour, of getting out of it.

'As a man of *honour!*' Godfrey repeated, unable to restrain a short laugh.

'At first, when I saw you, I was in a blue funk,' continued the lad. 'It all at once came into my mind that I cared more for what such people as you thought about me than for all the Nelly Blundells in the world.'

'Don't speak of her in that way,' said Godfrey, shortly, and don't suppose that because you have got out of this—through Providence, or your lucky star—that you are not to blame. You are fearfully to blame, and you don't know the end of it yet. Peregrine Blundell, my dear fellow, is, compared with you, a miracle of astuteness; and his temper can be as nasty as his brain can be quick. If he should hear all about this, and should take it into his head to be vindictive, your name may attain a degree of publicity anything but desirable to you, at this stage in your career.'

Harrison's face blanched. In a more subdued tone still he continued his narrative. The remaining circumstances have already been narrated. The burden of his song was, thankfulness for Godfrey's appearance on the scene, and the speedy end he had put to the half tragedy, whole burlesque in which he had cut so pitiable a figure. Godfrey did not exonerate him—he thought it best to let the lesson sink deep, and he was devoutly thankful that the whole thing had turned out so mean and so ridiculous. No one wants to be ridiculous—least of all a medical student, with a high idea of his own astuteness, who is bent on seeing the world, but who cannot quite cast off his own better feelings and the traditions of his mother's teaching and his home life.

'What would you advise me to do?' he asked, anxiously.

'I should advise you to get transferred to London, and walk the hospitals there instead of here,' said Godfrey, drily. 'And to keep a head on your shoulders while you are there. And now, if you have a room, or even a sofa, at liberty, I should like to go to sleep. It's two in the morning, and I did not begin my day with a picnic.'

'Yes, indeed! What a selfish beast I am!' said the lad. 'There is a proper room for you. I ordered it to be got ready

as soon as I came in. Will you shake hands with me, Noble?' he added, somewhat timidly. 'I know what you have done for me—ass that I have been—and I'll never forget it.'

Godfrey grasped his hand willingly enough. In truth, half his sternness was put on, because he felt it would not do to relax for one instant in the line of utter condemnation of the whole business with which he had started. In his heart he was as glad and as relieved as Reynold himself at the escape he had had. With a friendly good-night, they parted. In five minutes Godfrey was sleeping the sleep of utter weariness, but weariness without anxiety behind it. He awoke, feeling calm, strong, and perfectly refreshed, sent off his telegrams, breakfasted with his friend, and, on arriving at Askley Bridge, went straight to Great Undermoor.

CHAPTER XLV.

ALIZON STRIKES HER COLOURS.

The sun was shining, as it always did shine in a morning, into the pleasant library where Godfrey waited for Alizon. He stood near a table which was always covered with reviews, periodicals, and illustrated papers, together with a good many new books, and as he waited he mechanically turned over the leaves of a magazine, and stared at the pictures without in the least knowing what was meant to be represented by either print or pictures.

When, not four months ago, Godfrey had come to Moorside he had been a young man of promise indeed, to those who, like Dr. Stonex, were practised in reading men and women, and who cared to be at the trouble of thinking about him—of promise, but only of promise. Since then he had undoubtedly become a man of performance. Action, in his own affairs, and still more in the affairs of others, had been thrust upon him—for good or for ill he had had not to sit still, but to do. Now the man of mere promise, however beautiful that promise may be, can never have just the look and bearing of the man of performance. The events which had happened to him, though neither he nor they had made much outside show, had been sufficient to ripen his character with hot-house rapidity. His conduct had been the result of that ripening. It had been latent in him all along to act thus and not otherwise. He was,

in mind, in judgment, and in experience, years older, and years wiser, than the man who had been summoned in haste, in the dead of the night, to Peregrine Blundell's bedside. The inward change had brought with it a subtle outward one, a change impossible to describe. Perhaps the good old words of the much exploded Church Catechism might best define it—it was the 'outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.' It was the look of a man to whom, without his saying a word about it, 'Conduct is three-fourths of life.'

Alizon Blundell, entering the room, all eager and absorbed as she was in the affair to settle which she had employed him, was, in spite of her absorption, struck and impressed by this indefinable yet most potent change which had come over him. Some impetuous words had been on her lips as she came into the room, but when he raised his eyes and looked directly at her, those words and the desire to utter them died away. In silence, and slowly, she came towards him and held out her hand. Her dauntless eyes were fixed full upon him. They wavered as she gazed at him—not from fear, not from confusion, but from a certain consciousness that there was something in him which she did not understand—some strength, some virtue, inborn or acquired, of the nature of which she, with all her force and power, was ignorant. This consciousness did not altogether please her, for Alizon was very mundane in the midst of her great impulses and passionate generosities. Though she did not say what she had meant to say, yet she spoke first.

'Before you have told me anything, I wish to say, "Thank you." You have done me a great service—a very great service—and I am grateful to you. Now sit down here and tell me all about it.'

He did so, telling her every circumstance exactly as it had happened, with the exception of Reynold Harrison's name. This he did not tell her, and said he should not do so, unless any subsequent events should make it necessary.

'After this,' he said, 'she will never mention it, and, so far as he is concerned, let it be buried in a merciful oblivion.'

While he told his tale, she had not interrupted him save by one or two curt, pertinent questions. But her face had grown ever darker and darker as the narrative proceeded. It was black with suppressed wrath when he ceased to speak, saying:

'Now she is at home again, probably feeling desolation itself, I think, if she is properly managed now—and kindly—she may prove herself more reasonable and easily dealt with than ever before.

Whether she heard or did not hear these words of prudent counsel, he could not tell. She struck her hand upon the table and said, in a voice of passionate contempt and disgust:

'*Fool!*'

Godfrey pushed his chair back suddenly, and stood up. The expression, the tone, her whole attitude in the matter, jarred upon him.

'It is for you to settle with her now,' he said, coldly. 'If I may venture to say anything in the matter—and, since I saw her last and know in what state she was, perhaps I may—I would beg you not to go to her with that word, or anything like it, on your lips. You will do nothing with her if you do. You will simply make things worse.'

She lifted her eyes, and looked scornfully at him for a moment, and then said in a low, reluctant voice:

'You are quite right to say what you think about it. Only—in the name of reason and common sense, what am I to say to her? What am I to do with her? What can any rational being do with a creature like that, who has no reason and no self-respect in her?'

There was a pause. Godfrey was standing opposite to her. Again he opened one of the books on the table, and turned over the leaves. Then, shutting it, and with a sudden look of decision confronting her, he said:

'You speak of her from your point of view, and from that point of view I have no doubt she is all that you say. From her point of view, perhaps, the unreason is not so entirely on her side.'

'What do you mean?' she asked, curtly.

'I mean that, however great a fool she may have been, she acted thus out of a sore heart and a bitter sense of injury. Her attempt to take a revenge for the slights put upon her has been foiled. She has been arrested in trying to carry out her design; taken home and left there, with the sense that everything in her life and surroundings is out of joint. It is useless to go and call her a fool. She needs sympathy and soothing. If your own heart and your own woman's instincts do not furnish you with the right words to say to her, neither I nor any one else can teach them to you. That is what I mean.'

Again her face darkened. It was with anything but a pleasant expression that she looked up again.

'You mean that *I* ought to go and condole with *her?*' she said, looking him over from head to foot with anger and incredulity combined.

'I can but repeat what I have already said,' he answered,

maintaining both his point and his temper intact. 'If you do not know for yourself what to do with her and for her—what to say to her, and how to approach her—you cannot be taught how to do it. I have to tell you the truth, and that is the truth.'

She was silent again, looking very angry, very contemptuous. Nevertheless, a war was going on within her mind. The stakes were high. This attempt of Nelly's to make a serious scandal was a grave enough event, though her sister-in-law might stamp and call her fool, and fool she undoubtedly was; such a fool that perhaps it mattered little what course she, individually, might pursue. But, if she had succeeded in making herself first ridiculous, and afterwards perhaps disgraceful, instead of being brought home by Godfrey Noble, there would have been a stain on her children's lives; there would have been ridicule as well as blame attached to Peregrine. It had been a narrow escape. All her old sense of the utter hopelessness of the case came over Alizon. At last she spoke out her feeling.

'I don't see what is to be done,' she exlaimed. 'It is hopeless. She is one kind of nature—he is utterly different. He has behaved selfishly, cruelly, I know; he has put her into a shockingly trying position, because she has no dignity in her with which to meet such circumstances. But what better would it be if they tried to make it up—even if he could be persuaded to do so. In a week things would be worse than they had ever been before. It would be just like trying to make a fish and a fowl live in one element, and expecting them both to thrive. One or the other of those would be bound to die; one or the other of these two is bound to go to ruin, it seems to me. I confess what I have never confessed before. I see no way out of it.'

She leaned back, folded her arms, and looked at him.

'The only thing is,' said he, 'it is so very obvious which of them is bound to go to ruin. There is not the slightest danger to him. He has everything to gain by her going to ruin.'

She sat upright, suddenly.

'Do you mean that I wish any injury to her?' she asked, fiercely.

'Certainly not. What makes you say such a thing to me? As I came along in the train this morning, I was thinking it over; and one or two things struck me in respect of it. But I am somewhat in the dark. I hardly like to speak, because you may turn upon me and tell me I do not understand all the circumstances of the case.'

'But I can explain them to you,' she said, almost eagerly. It was a fact that she had, as she said, come to an end of her resources in the matter. All at once, however, she checked herself, exclaiming: 'But excuse me! It is shameless on my part to suggest such a thing. There is no earthly reason why you should have all this worry and consideration on our account. Leave me to see if my own wits will once again pull me through.'

'I do not mind the worry,' he said. 'If you don't object to my suggesting a different course in your affairs, I will tell you to the best of my ability what seems right.'

'I should be most thankful if you would.'

'First, then, I must ask a question. Mrs. Blundell has never been consulted in the arrangement of her own and her husband's affairs, has she?'

'You mean——'

'I mean, when the final, real separation took place—I don't know when that was—she had no voice in the matter. This is my conjecture. You will tell me if I am wrong. I imagine that when the rupture came, and your brother's health was found to be so seriously affected that he could not stand any more scenes, you were the emissary between them, and you made the best compromise you could see your way to!'

'Yes, I did.'

'You told her it was as much as his life was worth to anger him by demanding too much from him. You have, whenever she rose in rebellion, suppressed her as much as possible by depicting the future of the children if their father vindictively disinherited them. You have done all you could to make her content, or at any rate quiet, in the position you chose and arranged for her. Was it not so?'

'Yes. It was the best there was to be done.'

'There, I am sorry to have to say I disagree with you. At any rate, it is not the best that can be done, unless there are circumstances in the case of which I am ignorant.'

'No. You know them all—the main facts. It is a short and simple annal. All you don't know is the details of endless quarrels and makings-up again. I wish you would tell me of anything better,' she pursued, a deep and angry colour mantling in her cheek.

She pushed about a paper-knife which lay near her on the table, and her eyes were downcast; she strove hard not to show any resentment, but he saw that she felt it.

'This would be better—for you to go and see her; deal with her gently, speak to her sisterly,'—she bit her lips, as Godfrey

saw; she hated the idea, but he went on—'tell her that, since she has been driven to such wild and foolish measures as you have heard of, you are very certain there must be something very wrong in the arrangements which make her so unhappy, and that you would have it, if possible, put right. And then, instead of once more urging self-suppression and ordering her to sit still under all her irritation and displeasure, ask her plainly what her wishes are—what would content her. Ask her if she would really like an interview with her husband—ask her if she really imagines they could ever live together again. Ask her what she would have to say to him if she met him, and if she is prepared to accept the consequences which might accrue from an interview. You'll excuse me for giving you a professional example, but it will show you what I mean. When I was studying in London there was a woman at the —— Hospital who underwent a very dangerous operation, and after it was over and she had come out of her ether and chloroform, she asked for water. The nurse told her she could not have it, as it might be fatal to drink even a teacupful. She was tortured with thirst, and, being uneducated and irrational, she persisted in her demands for water. I watched the whole thing. The nurse refused, explained, and soothed fifty times at least. All she got for her pains was a string of reproaches for her cruelty and harshness, and "Give me water, or I shall go mad," was still the cry. The nurse at last filled a tumbler with water and put it where she could reach it. "Take it," she said, "and kill yourself if you like. You deserve to be punished for your stupidity." The woman looked at it. "Will it really kill me?" she asked. "Most likely. It will certainly make you very ill, but I wash my hands of you." "Take it away," said she, "I won't have it." She did not ask for it again. And I believe you will find it very much the same with your sister-in-law if you go the right way about it. She has a perfect right to be consulted in the matter. When it comes to the point, I don't think she will make any exorbitant demands. I don't know whether she will find any demands to make—of a serious nature. You will best manage her by giving her a little of her own way. I speak with diffidence, but I feel almost certain you will find that the best way of dealing with your difficulty.'

He had spoken, and now he sat and looked at her, wishing he did not feel so much as if he had been preaching a particularly long and didactic sermon.

Alizon's face had grown graver and graver as she listened to

him, not with that black look of anger, but with the gravity of profound attention. When he ceased, she sat still for a little while, breathing fast, her hands tightly clasped together. At last she looked up. He almost started—despite the Spartan way in which he had lately schooled himself never to betray any emotion to her—at the expression in her eyes, as she said, in a low voice:

'I thought I knew everything about it. It appears that I knew nothing. Have you anything further to advise in the matter?' she added, in a peculiar tone, whether sarcastic or mortified he could not tell.

'I have held forth in such a style that I am almost afraid to speak of anything more,' he said, trying to speak lightly.

'Nevertheless, if you have anything else to say, say it. I should like to hear all.'

'Well, if after you have spoken to her—should you decide to do so—she should really tell you of any particular change she would like to be made in her position, I should, if I were you, tell your brother about it. Explain her wishes, and tell him they ought to be considered. You look startled. You think it would be dangerous. I don't believe it would at all. Should he demur, and wish things still to go on at his own caprice, I believe, nay, I am almost certain that it would be your solemn duty to wash your hands of the matter, cease to stand between them, and, in vulgar parlance, leave them to fight it out between themselves. I don't believe it would make the slightest difference eventually. Your constant interposition never has made things right—it never can do so. They will go no more wrong for your leaving them to it than they do now—nay, I am not sure that they might not go better. One thing is quite certain—that she should be more consulted than she has been in the matter. That is what has forced itself upon my mind. I cannot help it if it is hateful to you. I have told you the best I could. I must go now. I haven't too much time.'

He rose. He knew he had said that to her which, if she took it ill, might estrange them for ever. In that case he would suffer—suffer horribly; for during the whole of the interview he had been longing with an insensate longing, more passionate than he had ever felt before, to drop the stiff and formal tone, to clasp her to his heart and tell her, thus and so is sympathy shown, and without having known what it is to love some one else till their very faults become sacred in your eyes and heart you can never give it. The look she had bestowed

upon him had been like no other he had seen in her eyes before. But he did not know what it meant. Looks are not so easy to read as some folk would have us suppose, especially when complicated emotions come into play. For aught he knew, it might be an expression of offence too deep for forgiveness. He could not help that. He had assuredly conquered himself in speaking the truth to her, and he would take the consequences. So he stood up, said he must go, and looked at her to learn if she had anything more to say.

Alizon also rose, her fingers still pushing the paper-knife to and fro. He began to realise that she too understood that their interview had a personal significance for him and for her —not only for poor unhappy Nelly and her concerns.

At last, with a violent, palpable effort she looked at him again, and said, curtly and between her teeth:

'I have listened to all you have said. You are right. I have been wrong. I shall do what you advise. I must have been blind. I tried to do right, but I despised her so much. She seemed to me only fit to be acted for, not to act herself. I see now it was wrong. Good-morning.'

She did not hold out her hand. She seemed to draw herself up and back from him as she admitted her error. He stifled a deep sigh, and a leaden weight of disappointment on his heart revealed to him the strong, unspoken hope he had had that she would take it differently.

'Forgive me, if, in the hurry of the moment, I have expressed myself roughly or have taken too much upon myself,' he said. 'Good-morning to you.'

He walked to the door. In spite of his unbroken outward composure, his heart at that moment was very sore—very hurt. He knew he would not long be able to wear that mask of calm composure.

He had placed his hand on the door-handle, and turned it, when he felt another hand upon it. Slowly he looked up. He wanted no more of the scene, but only to get away, and, if possible, not see her again for a great while. He looked up now, however, and saw her face, very pale, her eyes dry, but full of something softer than tears. She took his hand into both of hers, and her words hurried and stammered out one after the other.

'I must have seemed a perfect brute. I am hateful sometimes, I know. It nearly kills me to say I am wrong. But I was, and you—you promised to be my friend that night, ever so long ago, and you have never failed. I told you then that I was

trying, but you never thought I should treat you in this way, after what you had done for me and mine. But you will forgive me?'

'Forgive you?—nothing that you do could ever require forgiveness from me,' he exclaimed.

'I knew you would say so. You are still my friend, are you not?'

'Still!'

She suddenly lifted up his hand, imprinted a little quick kiss on the back of it, and then, almost pushing him out of the room, said:

'Go! go! go! before I repent of what I have said—but whether I repent or not it is true.'

Godfrey found himself outside the house without in the least knowing how he got there. It was not till he was at Moorside, in his dreary little consulting-room, confronted by a 'case' of nervous depression, whose doctor had sent her to the establishment to get rid of her for a time, that he began to pull himself out of the dream he had been in.

Fortunately, not much awaited him there. In an hour he was able to leave and walk to his house, there to find his sisters and to hear from them that at three o'clock Giles Barras was coming to him as to Letty's natural guardian, to demand of him her hand in marriage.

He felt that he had gone through the emotions of years within the last twenty hours—emotions almost entirely painful, but that at the end there had come to him a moment worth waiting for a lifetime.

CHAPTER XLVI.

PEREGRINE'S HIGHER MORALS.

THE day but one after that Alizon went to Kirkfence. She had called in the morning, to see Hilda, and had spoken a few words which somewhat mystified the latter. After speaking of Letty's engagement in a way which convinced Hilda that she was really glad of it, she said suddenly to her friend:

'You know I saw your brother yesterday?'

'Yes.'

'He probably did not tell you that we had rather a stormy interview?'

'No, he didn't mention that.'

'Well, we had. At first there was a considerable difference of opinion. But you know, he has a head on his shoulders as well as a heart in his bosom, that brother of yours. On reflection I found that he was right and I was wrong. I told him so—yes, I did, though you stare at me so incredulously. But I don't want to see him again for a little while. I don't like being in the wrong; it tastes bitter to me. See what a sweet disposition I have. I set him to do an intensely disagreeable piece of business for me. He did it. I was furious with him for giving me advice which I didn't like. But I am going to take his advice. It is the best I have had in the matter, and if things get themselves a little straighter now, it will be his doing, not mine. And I have not inward grace and decency enough to meet him pleasantly over it, and own up to my debts. By-and-by I can, but not now. Just now I feel that I have not sufficed unto myself. Do you see?'

'I suppose I do,' said Hilda, constrainedly.

'I just stepped up to tell you that my docility to his advice involves another journey to Kirkfence. I shall go to-morrow, and I may be away all day.'

'And you don't like that?'

'No, I don't. Nothing will ever make me like it. But it is right. I have always tried to act rightly, though I have, as it now appears from Mr. Godfrey Noble, made such a dismal failure of it.'

'Poor Godfrey!' said Hilda, trying to smile.

'"Poor Godfrey" indeed! There is such a luxury in being in the right yourself and showing others to be wrong that no one who enjoys it can be called poor. And he must have had his fair share of that luxury, must "poor Godfrey."'

Hilda laughed, rather nervously, wondering what it might mean. She was always afraid of betraying to Alizon that she knew how much Godfrey cared for her. She was not going to 'give him away' even to Alizon Blundell, and she always felt a certain constraint in discussing him with her. Apparently Alizon had come to say just that and no more, for with an ambiguous kind of smile she now rose and took her leave, saying:

'Are you going to the Manor to-night? Because I'm not. Peregrine is, but I shall be vexed and tired when I come in.'

'No,' said Hilda, forming a sudden resolution, 'I shall stay at home. Letty and Godfrey will go. Mr. Ashby and Mrs. Van Bibber will be there, I suppose.'

'I suppose they will. Well, Hilda, if you'll have me, after dinner I will come up and sit with you a bit. May I?'

'That would be delightful!' exclaimed Hilda, really glad at the prospect. 'I'll expect you.'

'Yes, good-bye for the present,' said Alizon, departing.

The evening came, and Hilda was alone. They had been bidden to dinner by Giles, to meet the two Americans, but it was a perfectly informal affair, and Hilda's excuse was easily accepted—that she was rather tired, and preferred to stay at home. A sense of rest and calm came over her, such as she had not known for a long time, when, after partaking of her slight and solitary supper, she went back to the drawing-room, lighted the candles, and, taking a book in her hand, awaited Alizon's coming. It was sweet to her—this friendship—and to-night there was the comfort of thinking that they would have the place to themselves, without any discordant surroundings. Though it was September, it was so hot and dry still that she had the window open, and sat near it with her book, leaving the blind up, to show Alizon the way when she should come.

Though the book was in her hand, she was not reading, but was lost in thought upon her own affairs and those of Letty and Godfrey. Letty, she supposed, would be married soon. Giles had expressed a wish to that effect, and there was no reason for delay. With real womanly feeling, she was congratulating herself that she had some money put away.

'He doesn't want a fortune with her, or he wouldn't have asked her,' she said to herself, 'but she shall have some things. And it will be a good excuse to go home rather sooner—that we have to choose them.' She smiled. 'Not that I think there is any need now.'

The door was opened. She looked up, and saw Hannah, who came in and said, 'Mr. Blundell,' let him into the room, and took her departure.

'You did not expect to see me,' said Peregrine, with great equanimity, 'did you?'

'I—Alizon said you were going to Mr. Barras's with the others.'

'So you thought you wouldn't go. I don't really know why you make yourself so unkind to me.'

She was silent. She would have liked to deny what he said, but she could not. It was perfectly true. The moment she had heard from Alizon that he was going to the Manor, she had decided to stay at home. She felt instinctively, however, that silence and embarrassment on her part would certainly not give her the upper hand in the coming interview, so she asked:

'Where is Alizon? She promised to come and see me.'

'She is tired, and she is cross,' replied Peregrine, imperturbably. 'She is quite aware of it, and she sent me to say so, and to make her excuses for not coming. At least, I'm exceeding the truth when I say she sent me. I saw she was not sociably inclined, and I offered to come and tell you, instead of sending a servant.'

'But why did you not go to Mr. Barras's?' she asked, feeling the question futile, but wishful to say something.

'Because I didn't want to,' he replied, with *sang-froid*. 'It's all very well there, but do you really think I am dying to spend an evening with Ashby and his sister? Your little sister has been charming, and will be again; but it isn't likely she can charm the general public, such as my insignificant self, when this is on between her and Giles. And the same may be said of Giles himself—a good fellow, once upon a time; will be a good fellow again in the future—at present intensely uninteresting, not to say absurd. Remains—your brother Godfrey. He will give me his company at home—where I value it. But what could I get out of him at an entertainment of that kind? No. If you had been going, I should have gone too. I told Alizon so, and she rather agreed with me. This is a much better arrangement.'

'They will miss you.'

'Not so much. They will miss Alizon, of course. Let us talk about something else. I understand you will not be in this neighbourhood much longer?'

'No, my holidays are nearly over.'

'How hateful to have to get into harness again on a given day, whether you wish it or not! Doesn't it make you feel like a slave?'

'Not in the least. Or, if all slaves feel as I do, the evils of the institution have been very much exaggerated.'

'I don't believe you. If I had the ordering of things, you should have no such grind.'

'But you haven't, you see.'

'No. Some changes will take place soon, then. When you go back, you have to stay there, I suppose?'

'Certainly,' she said, smiling; 'chained like a *forçat* to my oar, I have to stay there till the Christmas holidays come.'

'And your sister will get married soon, to Giles, I daresay.'

'I daresay. He wishes it, and Letty is—there is nothing to prevent it on her part.'

'And then the doctor will be alone here till you come back to him at Christmas, isn't that it?'

'I shall not come back to him at Christmas.'

'Why not?'

'Because I shall go and see some friends elsewhere.'

'But you'll never leave him to spend his Christmas alone?'

'You seem to think that would be brutal, but I very likely shall.'

'Well, I never!'

Hilda laughed a little.

'All people have not sisters so devoted as yours,' she said.

She could scarcely have made a more ill-timed remark. The careless smile died out of his face, his eyebrows drew together, and with a slight shrug of the shoulders he said ironically:

'It is devotion, I suppose, on her side. On mine the feeling is that it is oppression.'

'How can you say such a thing?' she exclaimed, indignantly.

'I can say it because I feel it very strongly. Your notions of what is right and wrong are so purely abstract, and mine are so very concrete. She has been to Kirkfence to-day—of course she has been to Kirkfence. I can see by her face that there has been some kind of a row. It is so stupid. She will never mend things by worrying about them in this way.'

Hilda was silent, longing to ask him if he knew this, that, or the other, and how he would propose, himself, to deal with such things. But she dared not do it. She knew not how far he was acquainted with what was going on. She knew not how much of it all Alizon meant to tell him, and above all she dreaded, with unspeakable dread, to vex him so much by any indiscreet remark as to bring on another attack of illness. She could never think without a shudder of the one she had seen him in.

'It is strange in you to call it oppression,' she said at last. 'Such love as she has for you, which makes her do these things for your sake and to save you pain, can never be oppression.'

'There I have to differ entirely from what you say,' he replied, lightly, so lightly that Hilda felt more truly than she ever had done before the incurable levity of his temperament—a levity amounting almost to a mental as well as a moral defect. 'Such love may be very great oppression. Well, when we came to live together at Undermoor, we said we would try it as an experiment—just to see how it suited. I have never forgotten that it was to be an experiment only. She has clean forgotten that it is not the natural and established order of things. She thinks it can go on for ever, because she is so strong that nothing breaks her. But she is

quite mistaken. I am going to make a change. I like change. You flew at me for saying I'd lost you,' he added, looking towards her, while she felt a chillness creep over her as the wretched topic was again brought forward. 'But, since I knew you here, I can't put up with this kind of existence any longer. I have been thinking about a great many things lately, revolving a great many things in my mind. I have been wondering very much how long I have to live.'

'Oh, don't!'

'But I do. I think of it constantly. That brother of yours could tell me if he would.'

'I am sure he could not. He has always said that you may live for a long time if you will take care.'

'What does he mean by taking care? Worry, bother, vanity, vexation, and disappointment—how can you take care when you live in an atmosphere of perpetual disappointment, unbroken and unrelieved?'

She was silent. There was nothing to be said which she was competent to say.

'Often, lately, I've thought I would cut it all,' he went on. 'Surely there must be ways for a man to get away from his hateful surroundings, when he is willing to pay for the release.' —['Does he think that any money will purchase release from himself?' thought Hilda, mournfully.]—'I would tell Alizon that I beg to relieve her of such an irksome charge as myself—let my wife and my children take up their abode at Undermoor, which I hate as never any man hated a place before, and go off somewhere, myself—to London—abroad. There are places where it's always summer, and where the very atmosphere soothes you and makes you contented.'

'It would not be a bad thing to do,' said Hilda. 'Perhaps that might really content your wife—to come to Undermoor. Why should you not try it?'

'Because I should be giving up everything, and getting nothing. I have told you often that I am not of a self-sacrificing nature. To do that would mean that I am beaten and done for on all sides—that I leave everything belonging to me to others who, it would appear, deserve it better than myself. I get out of their way, to leave them in peace, and go away alone, with no one but a servant for my companion—because there is no one who cares for me enough to come with me and give me a little friendship, a little help for the few years I have to live.'

'How *can* you say that, when Alizon is there, ready to stand

by you to the last—to give up everything so that you are benefited?'

Peregrine laughed.

'How can you say *that*, when I have just been telling you that her yoke is oppressive to me? Oh, I know how it is. I have made a mess of everything, and I have a mortal illness on me. There is a strong hand always ready to shield me and ward off trouble from me, and to guide me and lead me, and generally take all my own affairs out of my hands and manage them beautifully for me, and I am brute enough not to feel grateful for all these many blessings dispensed by the same hand, but to wish to amuse myself in my own way. Hilda—do you not like me to call you by that name?' he asked her, suddenly—'you always have a shocked expression when I use it. Does it offend you?'

'No, no! Why should it?' she said, hurriedly, not wishing to make it into an important point.

'Oh, I am glad of that, because to me it makes a great difference whether I call you "Miss Noble," or "Hilda." What I was going to ask you is this: Do you think that the bonds which bind me now, and make my whole life miserable to me, can be called a marriage?'

'Oh, do not ask me. I am not a judge in the matter. You told me before that I did not know what I was talking about when I said something about it.'

'You might answer me that, at any rate. Married or unmarried, a woman like you ought to know the difference between a real and a false union.'

'How many marriages can be called marriages, in the real meaning of it—a perfect friendship and a perfect sympathy? If that is the standard, I should think most marriages were but different degrees of not coming up to it. They have to be made the best of, I suppose.'

'There are so many ways of making the best of a thing. I told you I would like to cut all this. But not to beat a retreat, as if I had been in the wrong all along. Hilda, you are a very good woman. I've seen it many a time in the pity which is in your eyes. I told you your kindness had been sweet to me. I wonder how far you are pitiful and good. There are women, some women, who can put themselves into a man's place, and can understand to the full what such a condition of things means to him as the condition of things in which I live. There are women unselfish and pitiful enough to take a certain amount of blame from the outside, knowing what a ghastly

whited sepulchre sort of business is concealed under some of our most cherished social institutions'—he sneered—'there have been women who would set aside the world's opinion—which is simply the world's opinion—and would think the loss of it was atoned for by one man's whole undivided love and worship, and who would look to the inner meaning of marriage, not its outside show, and——'

Hilda had not spoken, nor started, nor uttered any exclamation as the meaning behind his words gradually forced itself upon her, as she read the unmistakable expression in his eyes. It all came gradually, and as gradually reduced her to stony, rigid stillness. She sat stiffly, as if frozen, looking at him with wide-open eyes, which gradually, as he spoke, filled with a slowly growing, appalled comprehension of the situation. He bent towards her, from the low chair in which he sat near her, and continued, in a lower voice:

'Don't you understand? I love you. If you will care for me as you could, did you only allow yourself, you may do what you please with me and what is mine.'

His hand touched her wrist. His eyes were still bent upon her face, filled with overmastering will. Through her mind flashed the feeling, 'If he goes on he will be able to make me think it is right.' Then a wild wish to save herself, a mad wonder in what way she was to do it. Then, not knowing what she did, but obeying simply an overpowering instinct of self-preservation, she rose from her chair, looking at him still with stony eyes. He rose, too, and confronted her, saying, 'Hilda!' and looking as if he would compel her to stay.

'You do not hate me for loving you?' he asked, and would have taken her hands.

'I hate you—and I hate myself ten times more.'

She thrust out her hands, pushing him aside, and walked past him somehow. Somehow, also, she got out of the room and upstairs to her own bedroom, shut the door, looked blankly about her, and began to pace to and fro, saying to herself, in a low voice of misery:

'What have I done? What have I done? How did it happen?'

It might have been ten minutes, it might have been hours, before at last she became aware that Godfrey and Letty must have come in; there were voices, footsteps, and Letty's voice called out:

'Hilda, you surely haven't gone to bed?'

With an almost superhuman effort over herself, she put

aside the matter which was filling her whole consciousness, and went downstairs to them. There was some talk and laughter. She heard about their evening at the Manor; she remarked, with wonderful *aplomb*, that she had had a call from Peregrine to say that Alizon could not come, and that he had sat awhile. At last Letty, laughing but sleepy, declared she could keep awake no longer. She went off to her room. Hilda asked Godfrey if he was going to read. He said yes. With a change of manner, which he noticed instantly, she said she had something to say to him, and they went into his study.

CHAPTER XLVII.

MEA CULPA.

At first they did not speak. The room was dark, and Godfrey occupied two or three minutes in lighting his reading-lamp. Hilda walked to the open window, and stood beside it. Nothing came from the outside except a little soft breeze, which rustled the leaves of the trees just outside the window, and which felt fresh and pure and sweet. It was so dry, so mild, and so delicious, though so dark, that she experienced the charm of it through all her mental agony, and felt a longing towards it—an unformed wish to be somewhere far away on the hills, with the great sky hanging above her, and without the scene in her mind which from henceforth, as long as she lived, never would be out of it.

As she stood thus, having almost forgotten where she was, she heard a step behind her, felt a hand on her shoulder, and turned to meet Godfrey's eyes fixed upon her face.

'Hilda, you were very clever,' he said, 'but you could not hide from me that there was something very wrong with you.'

'Godfrey, there is. But, just at this moment, what I feel almost more than that, is the bother I am to you, and the trouble. I'm sure your own affairs are not so perfectly smooth and happy that you want to be teased with mine.'

'My dear, I want to hear your trouble, and to help you out of it, if I can.'

'Well, I have a confession to make to you; but, mind you, it is a confession, and you must promise me that you will hear it under seal of confession, else I shall not tell you. And I *must* tell you. I cannot live with it alone.'

'I promise,' he said. 'I suppose it means that there is some one else in the case, and I am not to interfere. Perhaps I even know who.'

'Perhaps you do, but, all the same, you can't really know anything unless I tell you. Well, you have given me your promise, so I know I am safe with you. I told you Peregrine Blundell had been here. He heard I was not going to Mr. Barras's. Alizon was too tired to come and see me, after being at Kirkfence on his business. In fact, I think she was vexed as well as tired, and wanted to be alone, or she would have sent for me to go to her. He volunteered to come and bring her excuses. He came with a lie in his heart. He came because he wanted to see me, and to talk to me in a way in which he had no right to talk. He said something to me which was a shame and an insult. Yes, I knew you would be angry,' she went on, seeing a red flush rush all over his face, and his lips tighten one over the other. 'That is why I made you promise it should be under seal of confession. Because'—her face and lips grew white—'when he had said it, I knew I had not the right to turn upon him and spurn him. If I had had that right I would have told you openly of it, and you might have said or done just what you pleased to him about it. But that's the wretchedness of it. It has been my own fault.'

'No!' he said, sharply and suddenly, as he left her side and began to pace quickly about the room. 'You shall not say that. He is a bad fellow; he is mean, and a coward, taking advantage of his own weakness to do things and to shirk duties which no man has a right to treat as he treats his duties. At first, I was fascinated with him—he attracted me immensely—and I'm a hardened student of medicine and human weakness. You are a sensitive woman, open to all the spell he likes to cast over any one at the moment. You shall not say it was your own fault. He's bad—rotten to the core. He doesn't seem to me to know that there is any responsibility in life beyond getting the desire of the moment.'

He came back to her, and stroked her hair softly.

'It was my fault,' she repeated, in a low, distinct voice. 'It is useless to try to disguise it, and I am not going to. I have been a fool, and folly in a thing like that is the same thing as sin. There is something wanting in me for him to have been able ever to think it possible to speak to me in that way—much more so to do it. This is the kind of sister you have, Godfrey. Do you remember that day I was over here, to look at this

house? Do you remember what you said to me about him? I must have known at the bottom of my heart then that I was —attracted by him. I hated you—oh, how I hated you—for saying it. It began again after I came here this time. It has been my fault. I ought to have stopped it at the first word. His sister is my friend. She's all the world to me. She trusts me so implicitly that she has as it were given him into my charge again and again——'

'She has done that because she trusted him too,' said Godfrey. 'At least, though she knew him well, she had not known him completely. Though she knew him to be a scoundrel, she has not known how much of a scoundrel he was.'

She shook her head.

'And ought not I to have known what a scoundrel he was, the first time he said what I should not have desired her to hear! Was not that test enough? But, whatever I might know in my heart, I let myself be weak. And I knew I was weak. I—it pleased me when he talked to me about things; about questions of right and wrong. What a fool I was! As if people could not tell what is right and wrong, if they choose, without talking to each other about it. I deceived her by not speaking. Not to speak to her was to encourage him—and I am degraded *for ever*, through my own ill-doing,' she said, passionately, clenching her hands and shivering violently. 'I don't see how anything can wipe it out. I let him think he might say anything to me. I have been punished. I shall suffer for it for ever. I have made up my mind what to do. This place is poisoned to me, and I feel as if I were poisoned myself. I'm not fit to be here with Letty. I'm not fit to take Alizon's hand, and look her in the face, and yet I dare not speak to her, lest she should be angry with him, and he should be ill. I could not bear that. I am going home to-morrow. I shall have a fortnight in which to meditate on my own wisdom and superiority—my loyalty to my friends, and my unassailable uprightness and virtue. By the end of that time, perhaps, I shall have come to my senses and shall be able to begin my work again, and feel fit to go about with Letty, and help her in her preparations. I evidently don't know how to use my good things, so I am best without them.'

Her voice, aspect, and entire manner were hard, desolate, and determined. Godfrey's heart ached for her. He saw none of her weakness. He realised only her intense suffering.

'How could you take precautions against a thing which it

never entered into your head to dream of as possible—or to dream of at all? You quite overrate your own shortcomings and underrate his utter badness in the matter.'

'You say that because you are sorry for me, and want to be kind to me. I want no kindness. I know what has happened. All I want now is some one to help me to do what is right. You may forgive me. She might forgive me. I'll never forgive myself. I shall go away to-morrow, as I said. It is the one thing I can think of—escape. This is what I want you to do for me: do not let her think too ill of me for leaving in this sudden way. Say something to her that shall make it right till I can write and tell her about it. Make her understand that I am going to do that. Oh, it's of her I think—of her and of no one else. He is nothing—I feel it all now. How could I ever have thought for one moment that there was anything in him to care for? Letty will never know. You—ah, Godfrey, you are so good that it will never make any difference—and so I impose upon you in this way. But she—I don't know what she will do; if I knew, however bad it were, I'd face it out. But the horrible uncertainty would paralyse me.

'Why tell her at all?' he began, slowly. 'He will never speak of it, you may be sure of that.'

'Because she shall not have a false impression of me any longer. She trusts me and I have not been true to her. But I will be true to her now. No, Godfrey, don't persuade me. You cannot. It is the best thing when people can keep themselves straight. The next best, when they haven't done that, is to own up and take the punishment.'

'My poor Hilda!' he exclaimed—and, indeed, he was sorely puzzled. This was not a case of such plain sailing as he had found it in regard to Nelly and her misdoings. He put his arm round her, and drew her head on his shoulder, and kissed her beautiful shining hair, with yearning grief at his heart. It had been such a proud, high head in its time—now it seemed to have sunk so low. 'I hate to see you suffering in this way,' he said. But he could put himself almost entirely in her place; he could feel with her feelings on the subject.

His caress and his words had loosened the tension of her nerves, and broken the horrible dry-eyed composure which she had up to now maintained. She clung to him and burst into a passion of tears.

'What a creature I am!' she sobbed. 'I thought I was all right. I'm nothing—nothing at all. Do you remember telling me you were coming to Moorside? It is but five months ago. What an eternity since then! And I scoffed at you for taking

what I called a quack doctor's place. And I remember saying to myself, "Poor Godfrey! He will never succeed!" I thought I was so very successful. Oh, heaven! And I haven't even been able to behave so that a vile man should be afraid to insult me!'

'You are making it out ten times worse than it is,' he declared; but he was feeling a boiling rage in his own heart at Peregrine's baseness and treachery. 'Well, Hilda,' he continued, 'you have told me—you have told me what you are going to do. In the circumstances, I think it is the best thing you could do. Indeed, my dear, to take the view of the case which does not seem to have struck you, I simply could not endure you to remain any longer under this roof, seeing to whom it belongs. But we will not talk any more of it to-night. It will do you no good to enlarge upon it, now that you have once told me. I will do as you wish about speaking to—her. Go to your room now. You have got over the worst. You will sleep, though you may think not, just now.'

Hilda gathered herself up again, looking at him with her sorrowful eyes from her white and tear-stained face. She laid her hands upon his shoulders, and kissed him, saying:

'God bless you! You are much too good to me. You always have been my best friend, and I believe you always will be. If I hadn't been able to come and tell you all this, I should have gone and drowned myself in one of the fishponds to-night.'

'Tut, tut! Nothing of the kind,' said Godfrey, going with her out of the room. He lighted the candle, went with her to the door of her room, and bade her good-night, saying: 'Try not to think of it, instead of just the other way on;' and went downstairs again, looking very thoughtful. He smiled a little to himself, though, as he reflected:

'The thankfulness to be living is great. The case is not a hopeless one.'

Then his face clouded over again, and it was not much study that he accomplished that night, though it was many hours before he went to bed.

Hilda was preparing on the following morning to leave early in the afternoon. Trusting to Godfrey's faithful promise, she hoped not to see Alizon before leaving. He had said he would call at Undermoor early and say what was necessary to Alizon; and in somewhat greater tranquillity she went about her business. In the course of an hour, however, feeling exceeding weary and exceeding sad, she had come to a pause for a short time and sat down to rest in a chair near the window. A

moment afterwards she caught sight of Alizon's figure coming up the garden towards the house. For an instant, her head swam and she felt cold; then suddenly she said to herself:

'It is best for it to be like that. It was cowardly in me to want to shirk it. It will be horrible, but it will soon be over. I shall know before I leave what it is to be between us.'

She waited with what composure she might till in a few minutes Letty tapped at the door, looked in, and said:

'Hilda, here's your friend, waiting to see you. Will you come down?'

'Yes. Is she in the drawing-room? Oh, Letty, leave us alone, will you?'

'With all my heart!' said Letty, tartly. 'And I hope,' she added, *sotto voce*, as she watched Hilda downstairs, 'that something will be settled, or explained, or cleared up, for I don't like living with a feeling as if a thunderstorm or an earthquake were just going to take place, and finish one off. It's all those Blundells—every bit Blundells—they are like the Boffins in "Our Mutual Friend." I detest Blundells as much as that girl's mother detested Boffins. We never were uncomfortable and divided until the Blundells appeared upon the scene.'

Hilda went downstairs and into the drawing-room, where Alizon was awaiting her. She had not sat down, and she looked piercingly at Hilda, but with a smile. She stepped impulsively forward with extended hands. At first Hilda's heart leaped up with delight. Then she said, warding off the offered hands:

'Stop! Have you seen Godfrey?'

'No!' said Alizon, looking surprised. 'Was he coming? Well, he can just come back if he wants to see me. I left word where I was going. I want to know what all this means. Peregrine has been going on in the wildest kind of way. He came in last night and talked a lot of very wicked nonsense.—I did not believe him, but it vexed me awfully. I came up to you as early as I could to have that vexation dispelled, and you greet me like a Cassandra. What does it mean?'

'Tell me first what he said to you. Then I will tell you what it means.'

'He came in last night. I was reading in his smoke-room, lying on the sofa. I said:

'"Well, have you had a chat with her?"

'"Yes, if it could be called a chat." He did not seem communicative about it, and I (unwisely, I expect) began to say something about having been to Kirkfence. "Ah," he said,

"to try to keep my wife from getting into mischief, I suppose. I wish you'd spare yourself the trouble, and let her go her own way."

'I asked him what mischief she had been getting into lately, and he said he knew nothing about it. I don't know whether he did or not, I'm sure. But I proceeded to say that I thought, if she were long left in the present state of things, she would get into mischief, and hadn't we better talk it over and see what could be done?

'"No," he said, "leave her alone. If she would do anything that would set me free from her, then I should be able to marry the woman I want."

'He talks madly, you know, sometimes. But there was something different about this. I asked:

'"What woman do you mean?"

'And then, in a second it flashed into my mind that he meant you. I don't know how or why I knew it then, but I did. He answered:

'"Why, Hilda Noble, of course. If you had any eyes in your head, you might have known that long before now."

'This startled me. He is so wild and impulsive when he gets an idea into his head that I trembled lest he should ever have given you the slightest cause of offence. I said very gravely that he might perhaps say such things to me who knew him so well, but that he had better not even think of them any more. What was the use of doing it when it was hopelessly impossible? And I said that if anything could make me quarrel with him it would be knowing that the shadow of a careless word had been spoken by him to you. Why do you stare at me in that stony way?'

'Go on. Tell me the rest,' said Hilda, in a hoarse voice.

'If such a thing happened, I said I would part company with him, and leave him to himself. For I love you, Hilda—you and yours. You have made things seem so different to me, and I have got to understand that it might even be right, *the* right thing to do, to leave him to himself. Well, he laughed his most disagreeable laugh, and said I was too late. I told him I did not believe a word of it, and that, if he had ever forgotten himself so far as to utter one word of such a thing as—love, I suppose he meant, to you, you would have crushed him.

'"Oh," he said, "do you think she's not flesh and blood, like all other women and most men? Ask her!" And then—this it was that made me tremble—he suddenly turned aside, and put his arms on the mantelpiece, and said: "Oh, Lord! what an unlucky devil I am! I've been cheated out of everything

through one cursed mistake, and I've made her miserable, too."

'I could hardly sleep last night for thinking of it. He would say no more to me. So, as I say, I came up as soon as I could, to ask you the meaning of it. He has not said anything he should not have said, has he? Anything you cannot forgive?'

'It is true,' said Hilda, drawing a deep breath. 'He talked to me strangely, I thought, the very first time I was over here, but I would not think of it. But he has talked to me since. He has made love to me. He has done it more than once. It was my fault that he did it more than once. I thought I was strong, and that I could stand secure, and prevent it from happening again, and not trouble you with it. Well, I was mistaken. He told me he loved me. He implied it before. Last night he said so openly, and more than that. I got away and left him. I am going home to-day. I can never come here again.'

'But—but—stop!' said Alizon, her voice suddenly changing. 'I do not understand. I asked you, was it anything you could not forgive? It must be, from your way of speaking of it. But is that your friendship? Do you sweep us both away in one condemnation?'

'Oh, you do not understand. I have no right whatever to say I cannot forgive him. I am just as much to blame as he is.'

'Nonsense! You speak as if you had encouraged him.'

'I did. I did not tell him at the very first: "If you ever speak of this again, I shall tell my brother and your sister about it, for they are much more to me than your flattery can ever be." What encouragement could he want more than that?' said Hilda, remorselessly carrying out her resolve not to utter an excuse. She would not justify herself—she would not defend herself. She would brave the worst and take its consequences.

'This—this had happened—you let me send him to see you after he had said such a thing to you?—no, you never did!' said Alizon, in a sharp voice of pain.

'I did,' said Hilda, her head sinking, her heart fainting within her.

'I was your friend,' said Alizon in a whisper, and her face too had gone white.

Hilda did not speak. She would not say that in tenderness to that friendship she had at first allowed herself to be weak—had kept silence rather than reveal the brother's baseness and

levity to his sister. She would not say so because that had not been the whole reason of her silence. Though she loathed him now as something unclean, it had not always been so. There had been a delight and a fascination in the dangerous skimming over that thin ice which he had last night broken.

Alizon too was silent for a time. Then, as if trying a last resource:

'You did not know—he had not said anything to you before the ball?'

'Yes, he had.'

'But not at it?'

'Yes.'

Another silence supervened. It appeared an eternity to Hilda. At last her friend, drawing herself up a little, looked at her coldly from under her eyelids, and said, in a voice of ice:

'It was despicable.'

Hilda stretched out her hand, and held the top of a chair which stood near her. They had both been standing all the time. She felt as if her strength would give way. Her eyes were fixed upon the ground till in a moment she knew that Alizon made a step—a movement to go. Then, raising her eyes with a desperate effort, she looked at the other, with a dumb look of anguish and appeal.

'It was despicable,' she found voice to say. 'Alizon——'

Alizon passed her—she heard her open the door and close it again, and knew that she was alone. Presently she sat down, not really knowing what she was doing.

'How cold it is!' she muttered to herself after a time—and sat there, By-and-by the door opened, and Letty came in.

'Hilda! I thought you were finishing your packing. What's the matter?'

'Nothing. I was tired—that's all. I must go and finish now.'

She went upstairs and did finish. Just before one o'clock, she went to look for Godfrey and found him alone.

'I hear you have seen her,' he said, looking at her anxiously.

'Yes. It was much the best. It settled matters, once for all.'

'How?' he asked in a low voice.

'Badly—for me!' replied his sister, looking into his face, with a desolate attempt at a smile. 'Oh, Godfrey,' she added, with a little shiver of misery, 'it hurts—it hurts! Don't speak of it. Let us never speak of it any more.'

He was silent. Hilda kept her composure and presence of mind till she had seen the last of them, had said farewell at the station, and was alone in the railway carriage on her way to Kirkfence and home. Then, she would have given the world to weep, but could not.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

PEACE, OR SOLITUDE?

ALIZON left Little Undermoor, and went slowly back towards her own abode. Her whole head was weary, and her whole heart sick; but anger and passionate resentment at having been hoodwinked and betrayed—these were her principal sensations.

'I trusted her, and she has deceived me. Why did I ever believe there was such a thing as truth or loyalty from one woman to another? I concealed nothing from her: I gave her my whole confidence—I gave him into her hands, and told her he was weak and light-minded; and she has let him make love to her! Faugh! How sickening! How revolting! To listen to him sentimentalising, knowing that it was a sin for him to look at her, except as if she had been a block of stone! She has betrayed me. She has let me tell her I loved her—she has let me say she was my friend and my comfort and my joy—and she has had this in her heart! I wonder I did not kill her as she stood there. Base—plausible! Looking at me with those eyes that looked so true, and were lying—lying, all the time. There never was such a sin.'

She went into the house, and every moment her anger grew deeper and more corroding, till, all at once, she caught sight of the reflection of her own face in a mirror, and her mood changed to one of scorn for her own weakness in suffering so over the conduct of any one so worthless as were both of these two.

'Why make myself wretched over anything so contemptible? No. I have done with them both. I'll live alone, stand alone, and go on alone. No one shall see the faintest difference in me. They are not worth it. It is never worth while to make scenes over anything, or to feel as if anything could crush you. It is I who should crush them.'

She went about her various occupations, hardening her heart of intention and set purpose as she did so. She succeeded

pretty well in the outside show of it, but our thoughts are not always amenable to our wills. Every now and then there flashed into her mind the figure and the face of Hilda as she had left her—her look, as she faintly said, 'Alizon!'

'Hypocrite!' said Alizon to herself, with an angry shake of her shoulders.

She came in from the garden where she had been talking to Bayles, and found it was nearly lunch time. Passing the library, she glanced in, and saw Peregrine there. He looked up as she went by.

'Alizon!'

'Well?'

She went into the room, and looked at him. She had said that none should see any difference in her demeanour, but she could not face him as if nothing had happened.

'You have been to Little Undermoor,' he said, quietly, with a quietness, indeed, that she did not like.

'I have.'

'I expected you would rush off there first thing, and, if possible, make bad worse,' he said, with cutting emphasis. He looked ill and worn, and as if he had not slept. 'Did you see her?' he demanded.

'I went on purpose to see her.'

'And you spoke to her of what I said to you last night!

'Naturally—when I went expressly to speak about that,' said Alizon, almost beside herself.

For once she gave the rein to her displeasure—thrust back the usually paramount feeling—the dread of making him ill by any sharp words or agitation. Her tone in replying to him was as abrupt as his in questioning.

'What did she say?'

'I am not going to talk about it. It is between her and me.'

'I'll be hanged if it is between her and you. But for me, you would never have known a word about it. Tell me what she said,' he commanded her, 'or I'll go and ask her myself.'

His eyes looked dangerously bright, and his lips ominously thin.

'Well, if you will have what she said, it seems to me there has been a pair of you, and that you have been vile—neither more or less,' she said, with high disdain in her look and voice. 'I went to her because I feared from what you said to me last night that you might have annoyed her, and I wanted to make it straight with her. In that spirit I spoke to her. She told

me it was true what you had said and done. She said she had encouraged you. She had not, at the very first, said that if ever you opened your lips on such a topic again she would tell me and her brother that you had done it. And, as she justly remarked, what more encouragement could you want?'

'She said that? She did not say that I was to blame?' he asked, incredulously.

'No. She was candid. She braved it out,' said Alizon, with a disagreeable smile. 'I suppose, if she was capable of the one thing, she was of the other. She told me it had been her own fault.'

'She is a Spartan. How could she treat herself like that? You can't understand, but I can. Your heart was never touched. You have never in your life known what it is to be "in love." You would laugh at the notion of caring for any one so much as to do anything wrong for their sake. I have been in love, in my way, and Hilda Noble, whom you think so *vile*—well, she could have loved me, I know, if things had been different. If she wasn't in love with me, she wasn't hard upon me. But because she did not apply the cold steel to her heart and mine, and expose us both to you, on the instant, you have —Have you made her a scene?' he broke off, suddenly.

'No. I heard what she had to say. It turned everything upside down for me. I gave her every chance of clearing herself; I would have grasped at the merest straw to show that she was all right in the matter. But it was no use. She told me the facts. I told her that she had been despicable, and I came away and left her there.'

'Then you've broken her heart,' said Peregrine, in a low voice of such intense passion and emotion as she had not believed him capable of feeling. He was standing up too, now, looking at her with an excited, unusual expression. Now he turned to the window, and looked forth from it for a moment, with his back towards her. 'You've broken her heart,' he repeated at last, turning round again. 'Why did you do that? Have you no pity for any kind of weakness? Can you make no allowance for those who are not made of steel like yourself? Poor Hilda!' he went on, in a voice which she scarcely recognised. 'She has found but sorry friends here. Deceit—perhaps she might have something to say about deceit, too, when she has been insulted by a presumptuous brute like me, and then called despicable by you, because she was too brave and too honest to cry out: "It was he who did it—it wasn't I." You seem to think,' he added, turning upon her with a quiet

fury which appalled her, 'that there's only one kind of goodness, one kind of conduct—never to do wrong, and so to be able to trample upon all who ever fall short of it. I tell you, there's a better thing than that, and a braver—to say you have done wrong, and take whatever comes of it, and make no excuses for yourself—and that is what she has done to-day. You call her vile—you are viler than she is, now.'

She stood, looking at him silenced, overpowered, with, in her heart, a wild desolation, like a moral tornado, raging and destroying. A thousand thoughts, speculations, conjectures, flashed like lightning through her consciousness. A thousand doubts assailed her soul—doubts which she had never known before. All her life long she had held it as an indisputable fact that there was a law of conduct which each man and woman could obey, and go through life scathless; it was only the will, the moral resolve, that was wanted to effect it. And, whoever obeyed that law and guided his path by it, the same should have peace and certainty—tranquillity, if not happiness—and there was no need for mental debate, or wild questioning, as to what was to be believed and what not believed. It did not seem to have answered, somehow—this stoic kind of standard. She had, as she believed, clung to her ideal, and not fallen from it, but here was a fearful muddle of some kind, and here was a person who had certainly never acted up to any such standard, who had just acted below most standards of decency and honour, turning upon her and telling her she was viler than a woman whom she had just stigmatised as very vile. It could not be true. What right had he even to open his lips in judgment on a matter of right and wrong? But, to her own anger and bewilderment, she found no words in which to answer him. And again Hilda's face rose before her spirit's sight—Hilda's confession—Hilda's obstinate self-blame—Hilda's look of anguished appeal. If she thought of it much oftener, she would be weak. She said at last, in answer to his passionate thrust:

'*You* are scarcely competent to say who and what is vile. The whole business is revolting beyond description.'

'Human nature is revolting, and indecent too, sometimes,' he retorted, with a quiet savageness in his tones. 'Look here!' he added, as she was turning away. 'I want to say something to you. This has gone on long enough. I'm going to make a change. I don't think our experiment has been very successful, so far, and after this I don't see where a *modus vivendi* is to be found for us two. I'm quite too bad to live with you, that is evident. You cannot make allowances for

any one so vile as I am. And I don't think I shall ever come up to your standard. I shall take matters into my own hands, and, when I have decided what to do, I'll let you know. I'm going upstairs now—this has rather upset me. Don't trouble yourself about me again to-day. I don't suppose I shall come downstairs any more.'

He went away. She did not speak to him as he went out, but sat down by a table and tried to understand what it meant.

One thing was clear to her; the instant that Peregrine awoke from his state of acquiescence in her arrangements, and seriously disputed her right to manage for him, her authority collapsed. Ill or well, bad or good, moral or immoral, he was his own master, and the master of his fortune and estate. He was in his sane mind, and unless she could influence him by superior moral force, or sheer strength of will, she could not influence him at all. It seemed he had cast off her moral influence, and his will was as strong as hers. She might as well give up the attempt to guide him.

'I am nothing,' she said to herself, later in the afternoon, when she had eaten her solitary lunch, and was alone again. She knew not what Peregrine did with himself during the rest of the day. She herself spent some bitter hours, not knowing where to turn or what to do, or what was going to happen. She could only be silent and wait, which suited her spirit not at all.

She had yesterday had her interview with Nelly, but had not extracted much from her. It was, however, true, as Godfrey had prognosticated it would be, that Nelly, on finding she was herself to be consulted as to the disposition of her own affairs, had brightened up wonderfully, and had spoken with more reason, more dignity, less triviality and selfishness than Alizon had ever known her to display before. They had come to no definite conclusion, except that Nelly was to think things over, and let Alizon know the result of her deliberations. She had looked quite pleased at the prospect, and was evidently not in any hurry, but gratified to feel that there was something in her power in the arrangement of her own life. This happier frame of mind had been brought about, though, as Alizon reflected, not by her own wise devices, but by the advice of a comparative stranger, who had looked at the situation with sympathy and insight, and had seen the natural and not the artificial way of dealing with it.

She felt that her friends were dwindling. Giles would soon cease to be more than a kindly, genial neighbour. Letty, she

knew, mistrusted and disliked her. She had herself that morning said words to Hilda which would sunder them for ever. What woman, with the faintest trace of pride or self-esteem, not to speak of one so proud as Hilda, would bear, after forcing herself to the agony of such a confession as she had made, to be told that her conduct had been despicable, and would then forgive?

'Forgive!' Alizon exclaimed to herself. 'The idea! What have I to do with a false-hearted woman who has betrayed me?'

At the same time, she had a lurking knowledge that had she not been, as Peregrine had said, 'steel' in her dealings with Hilda, they might have been more united now than before, instead of divided for ever.

'Bah! as if I wished to have any union with her,' she muttered.

And Godfrey! He was true, at any rate. Not for one moment did she think of him as other than perfectly innocent in this matter. And she had got to look upon him as very much her friend indeed. But though he was true, and though he was forbearing and generous, as she knew, he would certainly not be human if he did not take his sister's side now. Things could never be the same between them again.

'Well, they will have to be different. I can do without even him,' she said, doggedly. 'I suppose, when one elects to fight lies and treachery, one must expect to be left a good deal alone, since they seem to be so prevalent amongst the best kind of people!'

At night she went upstairs early, because she could not bear to remain any longer alone in the empty, desolate rooms, thinking of Peregrine, and Hilda, and Godfrey. It was still hot and sultry, and when she got to her own room, she partially undressed, put on a loose wrapper, and having set her window wide open, she lighted her lamp, put it on a little table near the window, and taking two or three of her favourite books, sat down, saying to herself:

'Now I will read; I don't feel sleepy.'

But the books, which she had studied so often—diverse as they were—her Marcus Aurelius, her 'Imitation of Christ,' her 'Vauvenargues,' and others—now brought accusation instead of comfort. She fought against it, but it was there. These wonderful thoughts of wonderful men merely echoed the words which her scapegrace brother had brought against her—they also, as well as he, said: 'What is the use of loving truth and justice, honour, honesty and right-doing in the abstract—

nay, even of practising them in your own life—if you will never allow less than perfection in others, will never understand that what to you may be merely incentives to right-doing, to them may be stumbling-blocks almost impossible to surmount?' 'The greatest of these is love.' That also stared her in the face, and she had always been under the impression that she understood it, and had had a dim idea that people who did things they excessively disliked, for the sake of others and not for themselves, practised the meaning of it.

'And I do know the meaning of it,' she reiterated, obstinately, to herself. 'Forgiveness is very well, but not always. There is a point beyond which it may degenerate into weak, drivelling sentimentality. That is not my way. If I had not cared for her so much, and been so completely confident of her truth and honour, I should never have felt one of these doubts. One cannot wrench out all one's preconceived notions in a moment. I know I am right.'

She shut up the books and resolved not to listen to these feeble suggestions of weakness, and then wished she did not feel so wretched. She sat idly in her chair, with the lamp behind her, and looked out into the darkness of the night, and listened to the stillness which was almost audible.

A long time passed in this kind of vigil. She felt very wakeful—her brain very active, rest or repose far from her. To her splendid health and unshakable nerves the loss of a night's sleep made very little difference. She had no thought of going to bed, and had not even begun to wonder if it were very late, when she was surprised by a knock at her door, and said:

'Come in.'

It was Peregrine's valet. When she saw him, she started up, her whole being one wild alarm; everything that had happened in the last forty-eight hours swept for the time being out of her consciousness in the danger—for danger it was, as she knew.

'Mr. Blundell is very ill, ma'am. I have tried all the usual remedies, but they have no effect. I have never seen him so bad.'

CHAPTER XLIX.

I WILL BE DIRECTED.

BEFORE he had finished speaking, she had darted from the room, along the corridor, down the stairs to where Peregrine's rooms were. She was by his bedside, facing the sight that had more horror for her than any other in the world. At a single glance she saw that he was, as Wilson had said, very ill indeed; more ill than he had been even on that night when Godfrey had been first summoned to him.

'If he should die, and I could not tell him that I am sorry—or before he could say, "I forgive you!"'

This was the wild fear that knocked importunately at her heart and filled her consciousness, while, with outward self-possession, and without an instant's loss of time, she turned to the man, saying:

'Go this moment to Little Undermoor, and bring Dr. Noble here. Don't lose a second. I will stay here. There's nothing to be done till the doctor comes.'

It seemed an eternity before Wilson returned, accompanied by Godfrey. It had been a little more than ten minutes.

Godfrey knew there must have been something very wrong between her and Peregrine when she, not heeding the presence of the servant, sprang to his side, seized his arm as if in a vice, and whispered (not forgetting, even now, to prevent Peregrine from knowing all her alarm):

'Get him out of it quickly. He must not die this time—not yet! I am sure you can do it.'

'Let us see what can be done,' said Godfrey, putting her gently aside, and going up to his patient.

It was a hand-to-hand struggle with death in which they now engaged, for the spasm was a terrible one, and at first no remedies took any effect, no applications could warm the death-like coldness which had him in its icy grasp. Each shuddering, agonised breath seemed as if it would be the last; so that Alizon herself felt as if her last hour had come, in the intensity of her longing to wrench some of that suffering away from its victim, and her passionate feeling that she could bear it so much better than he could. Suspense and fear had conquered even her. She beckoned the servant to take her place, cast herself into an easy-chair where Peregrine could not see her, and, covering her face with her hands, waited.

'Tell me when there is anything different,' she said briefly to Godfrey, and he knew the unspoken meaning that lay behind her words.

At last she heard his voice.

'You can come now, Miss Blundell. He will come out of this.'

In a second she was at his side again, and though at the first glance he looked just the same, yet directly she saw that Godfrey was right. A change was creeping over his face, the colour of life was gradually returning to his lips, and at last he gave them a look which had in it something that was not merely agony and nothing else.

'Peregrine!' she said, hardly able to articulate the word, and bending over him.

He looked at her without speaking for a moment; then turned to Godfrey, and said:

'That was a bad one, wasn't it?'

'Pretty well,' said Godfrey, nodding. 'You are better now.' His eyes had never lost sight of Alizon, though he was speaking to Peregrine, and apparently looking at him. 'Here!' he said to the servant, suddenly, but without haste. 'You stay here a minute. Put some more of this stuff on to the handkerchief and give it to him. I'll come back,' he added to Peregrine; and then, taking Alizon by the arm, he led her into the next room, Peregrine's smoking-room, filled with his things, smelling of tobacco and Russia leather.

The blind was up. The chill morning light was in the room, grey and ungenial. Outside, the trees stood motionless in a soft white mist.

'Oh,' she gasped, 'I thought he would never come back here any more.'

She sank down upon the divan against the wall, and for the first and last time in her life lost consciousness and fainted away.

It was, however, only for a moment or two. When she awoke again with a sigh, Godfrey was still standing by her.

'Now you are better. Drink this water and come to his room again as soon as you feel fit, not before. He will be very weak after this, and he must be kept clear of anything in the least agitating.'

'Yes,' said she, and Godfrey went back, leaving her alone.

When, after a very short time, she rejoined them in the bedroom, he was surprised, well though he knew her strength, to see how completely she had recovered her composure. Pere-

grine was now free from pain, though he looked more dead than alive. When he saw her come in he did not speak, and she merely said, gently:

'You are better now?'

'Yes, thank you. I've given a lot of trouble.'

He turned to Godfrey. The latter, as soon as possible, sent Alizon away, and leaving full directions with the man, and with a promise to come again during the forenoon, he went away himself.

Alizon, on getting to her own room again, found it was half-past five, and that she had what she had scarcely ever before suspected she possessed—nerves, and that they were unstrung. She adopted her own plan of dealing with this contingency; plunged into a cold bath, dressed, and, putting on her hat, left the house and garden, and struck out over the moor, in a lonely, little frequented direction. Here, alone in the profound stillness and crisp freshness of the autumn morning, she climbed quickly upwards, seeing the warmth of day gradually appear, and despite the soft mists which had hung over everything when she set out.

When she had gone as far and as high as she wished to, she came to a pause, and looked about her. Brown heather and yellow bracken waved in a sea of beauty over the flat table-land on which she stood, and rose about her feet. Below, the valley lay spread like a map; the white roads, the grey river, the fields green and brown, the woods with their autumn nosegays of colour. There was her bugbear, Moorside, on the hillside. There was the thick wood which surrounded her own home, and the small house belonging to it. She could see the chimneys and part of the bulk of both, and she looked down at them long and sorrowfully. Could she, perhaps, from this physical distance get any clearer view of the moral situation? Be that as it might, she made a vow and swore an oath in her heart, as she stood there, and, after turning her eyes southwards in the direction into which Hilda had yesterday journeyed, her gaze once more turned to the two Undermoors.

'I will take what comes. I will do nothing, say nothing, suggest nothing. It is outside my province. I will be directed.'

CHAPTER L.

THE DECISION.

For days after his terrible attack of illness, Peregrine remained weak and ill in the extreme. Godfrey, who visited him every day, absolutely forbade his getting up, nor indeed was he able to do so, but spent most of his time lying on his back, afraid to try even a change of position lest the terrible thing should seize hold of him again. During that first day Alizon did not see him at all until evening. Godfrey had come again about eleven o'clock, and had enjoined silence, quiet, and almost solitude; he ordered that the invalid should see no one but his servant, who was a skilful nurse.

Alizon was forced to endure this as best she could. She did not see Godfrey either. She knew he was in the house, and the unprecedented occurrence took place that she felt herself wanting in the courage to intercept him on his way out, either to ask him about Peregrine's state, or to hold any conversation with him on her own account. He did not ask to see her, she found; she received Wilson's report of his visit and his orders, and made no comment upon it, but this little incident—Godfrey's taking his departure from the house without seeking any interview with her—sank deep into her heart, and showed her, perhaps more than anything else could have done, the depth of the gulf which she had made between herself and him and his.

Her mood of the morning was still upon her. Her solemn promise to herself, 'I will be directed,' had been wrung from her by the deepest feelings, the strongest convictions she could experience. She was quite clear in her own mind what she meant by this promise; it would be the hardest one to keep that she could possibly have made, and little time elapsed before she was put to the test. It came at once in this painful experience of Godfrey's aloofness and the banishment from her brother's room which, though it might be desirable enough, would not, she felt sure, have been ordered by Godfrey if he had not guessed or been told that her presence would vex and agitate Peregrine.

The day passed drearily enough. She knew that Godfrey paid a second visit to his patient, during the day, and again she did not see him. Late in the evening Wilson came to her with a message from Peregrine that, if she had time, he would be glad to see her for a few minutes. She went upstairs, feeling

most sad, most uncertain, and low-spirited. It was with a kind of terror that she re-entered the room in which had passed all the suffering and struggle of the early morning. Softly she entered, and as softly went up to his bedside, and looked at him, placing her hand timidly upon one of his which lay motionless on the quilt. He looked as white as a sheeted ghost; the slightly arched line of his fine black eyebrows, the cloud of silky dark hair, and the exhausted dark eyes formed a marked contrast to this pallor. His face, despite its hollow look, was, so far as line and contour went, a beautiful face, and always would be. Alizon, at this moment, felt it to the depths of her heart, as she looked earnestly at him, and, in her new-born compunction and self-distrust, realised thoroughly that to other women, who were not his sisters, monitors, and oppressive guardians, its beauty and the charm which he could exercise when he so pleased might be dangerous in their fascination. Dimly and suddenly it was borne in upon her what influence he might wield over an emotional, susceptible, highly strung nature. 'Like Hilda's'—forced itself into her mind. Had he not always, when he had chosen to charm and persuade even her, with her eyes open to all his faults and all his follies, succeeded in beguiling her into indulgence of his crotchets, connivance at many a proceeding of which she disapproved? And was it likely to be less so with others, who saw all the charm and less of the hard reality behind it than she did?

'You wanted to see me, Peregrine,' she said, very softly.

He made no return of the touch of her hand—always before, after one of these terrible illnesses, he had readily taken her hand and held it for a time, if no other sign of feeling had passed between them. But there was no response now, and fearing to annoy him, she removed her own from his and looked at him.

'I sent for you,' he replied, in such a weak, extinguished voice as she had never yet heard from him; but, from the expression which suddenly crossed his face and came into his eyes, she knew he had no kindly words to say to her. She dared not speak first, but waited to hear what he had to say. 'It wasn't that I particularly wanted to see you,' he continued. 'Servants are always jabbering. You have always been with me before, and I thought they might think it queer if I didn't see you now. So I asked you to come—that was all. Noble says I mayn't get up for ever so many days, but that I shall get over this.'

'Yes, I am sure he will tell you only what is right,'

'It's late, isn't it? Have you had dinner?'

'Yes; it is nearly ten.'

'Noble is coming to see me again to-morrow. He told me to see no one to-day, so I suppose I had better be quiet now. I'm awfully tired when it comes to trying to talk.'

'Very well. I am sure you had best be quite still and say nothing. I won't stay; I am glad I have seen you. Good-night.'

'Good-night!' said Peregrine, with a slight, almost imperceptible smile.

Once more she touched his hand with hers. Once more no responsive movement came from his. She turned and went away, sent Wilson back to him, and went into her own room, where, after standing still for a moment, she burst into a passion of tears—wild, terrible, uncontrollable tears and weeping. She was a woman who might be said to 'never cry,' and the storm left her feeling physically as well as mentally prostrate. She had never felt so ill in her life, nor so desolate and solitary. She saw nothing for it but to submit, until at any rate Peregrine should be much better, and able to give his views on different subjects.

A week or more passed thus, during which time Peregrine, though he got up, was not allowed to leave his own rooms. As he got a little better, he sent for her two or three times; she passed in and out of his rooms, bringing him flowers from the greenhouse, books and newspapers, as she had been in the habit of doing. Not the faintest allusion to what had happened passed between them. Outwardly, things looked much as they always had done, only—there was the chasm between them, which seemed to grow deeper and deeper as the days went on. There was the continued cessation of any intercourse between Godfrey and herself. Once she met him coming out of Peregrine's room, as she was about to go into it. She had not known he was there, having come straight upstairs from the garden where she had been. Alizon must have been brought very low by that time, for she paused, looked at him, and wished him good-morning. She dared not hold out her hand lest he should refuse it.

'Good-morning,' said the young man, quietly enough, as he made her a ceremonious bow; but she saw the sudden colour that covered his face.

She longed wildly to be inspired with the right words to say to him; but, ready in resource as she usually was, she failed on this occasion to say something appropriate in time. For,

almost without a moment's pause, he passed her and went quickly downstairs.

'He can resent, then?' she said to herself. 'Well, it would be a miracle if he didn't.'

Peregrine never mentioned him to her, though she knew quite well that he had long conversations with him; and this, too, was a source of wondering speculation to Alizon. How much did Godfrey know of what had passed between his sister and Peregrine? Was he destitute of sensitiveness on such points? Was he too 'despicable' in such matters? Or was he—was he—what was he? Something considerably stronger and better than she had hitherto taken him for?

All this, and kindred reflections tedious to relate and dwell upon, formed for Alizon the opening of a new kind of spiritual and mental life. As the days of solitude and sorrow and humiliation crept slowly by with leaden feet—so it seemed at the time—she was growing inwardly, though she knew it not. She only understood afterwards, on looking back and finding how long a time had in reality sped by, how much she had felt, learned, and experienced during that time.

One evening, a fortnight after Peregrine's seizure, he had, for the first time, come down to dinner. Alizon maintained an outward cheerful serenity, but she knew as well as possible that the thought in her brother's mind, as well as in her own, was that, but for what had happened, the natural order of things would have been that Godfrey should be seated with them, rejoicing with them over the invalid's comparative recovery. It was a bitter thought, one which hurt more keenly than she would have admitted.

When dinner was over, he asked her where she was sitting, and, when she said, 'in the library,' he said he would come there too. They entered the room. A bright wood fire blazed on the hearth; the lamps were lighted, the curtains drawn; the place looked the picture of cosiness and peace. She took her usual chair, and her book in her hand, but glanced at him before beginning to read.

He was standing by the mantelpiece, one elbow resting on it. One hand, white and almost transparent in its thinness, he spread out to warm in the blaze.

'I've some business to talk to you about,' he said, 'and I want to get it done.'

'I am at your service,' said she, laying down her book, and wondering if it were very disagreeable business.

They had had a good many disagreeable interviews in this

room; here it was he had insisted on having the ball which had been so disastrous in some of its indirect consequences; here had taken place that worst scene of all, after she had come back from seeing Hilda at Little Undermoor.

Peregrine did not keep her in any suspense.

'I told you before I was taken ill that I meant to have some other arrangements. I was tired of this kind of thing, and this last affair has not made me think differently.'

'Are you sure you are able to talk of business to-night—the first time you are down?'

'Yes, quite,' he said curtly. 'I have had plenty of time to think things over, and I have decided upon everything now; but, before I talk about that, you may as well know that Noble is not going to stay at Undermoor.'

'Indeed!'

The word dropped tonelessly from her lips. The news was so very much what might have been expected, but, by the feeling which swept across her heart when she heard it, she knew what bad news it was to herself.

'No. It's only likely that he should wish to go. We had it out one day. I made a clean breast of it to him. It seemed he knew all about it. I asked him how he could go on coming to see me. He said that was all right, but that he was afraid everything else was all wrong. He was for leaving me then and there, and taking his little sister away with him; but I threatened to have another fit and finish myself off altogether, if he did, so he consented to stay for a little while, till he leaves Askley Bridge.'

'He is going to leave the place?' asked Alizon, quickly.

'Yes, and no wonder. His sister is to be married to Giles at the end of the year, but from where they lived before, not from here. When he takes her there for the wedding, he takes himself off at the same time, not to return. I don't want to talk about it. He is the best fellow I ever knew. We'll drop that.'

She made no answer, but sat with her hands folded on her lap, and gazed into the fire. Godfrey going! And she heard of it from a third person! Peregrine's voice continued:

'He's going. And I am going too. I don't mean to have my headquarters here any longer. Perhaps I may come occasionally. But I can't stand it for a permanency.'

'Where shall you go, then?'

'London, first. Perhaps I may go abroad afterwards, but I'll try London first. I find my old rooms in Clarges Street

are vacant, and I shall be received there with open arms. One amuses oneself better in London than at Askley Bridge, even though one may be an invalid,' he went on, meditatively. 'If it doesn't suit me, I can go where I please. I have the world to choose from, and that always makes it more difficult.'

'You will have Wilson with you, of course?'

'Oh, of course. He's quite indispensable to me. He was kind enough to make no objection to the arrangement when I spoke to him about it. In fact, he approves of it. He thinks the change will do us both good,' said Peregrine, laughing a little.

'Well, he is very valuable, of course. But . . . . Pray excuse me. He isn't a companion for you, after all. You never made a companion of a servant, and never could. And, though the novelty of the thing may amuse you at first, yet you will soon find you have to be as quiet there, as here, almost—or to pay a frightful penalty. You know you will, Peregrine,' she added, almost beseechingly. 'I don't want to throw cold water on your plan, but, though I have not been the sort of comrade you liked, yet even I must have been better than in lodgings, with no one but Wilson.'

'I have thought about that, of course,' said Peregrine, and this time there was a slight change in his tone, an accent of something like embarrassment. 'It would be extremely wretched with no one but Wilson, so I shall have some one else as well as Wilson.'

'Why, whom?' she asked, looking at him, as one wild conjecture after another flitted through her mind. Not Nelly? Wildly impossible. Not Godfrey Noble? Still more so.

'I shall take my son with me,' replied Peregrine, deliberately.

'Your—son!' she echoed, slowly, staring at him, and for the moment wondering if he were in his senses.

'Yes, my son. Of course such a thing never occurred to you as that I should dream of doing so. But it occurred to me some time ago, when I had made up my mind to put things on to a different footing. I've often thought about the little beggar, and rather wished to see him; but I never saw my way to managing it without stirring up a lot of disagreeables, and having a regular row over it. But now I've made up my mind to pay the price which it will cost to have him to myself, and I shall take him with me and have him properly looked after till it's time for him to go to Eton. He's hardly old enough to have a tutor yet, and I don't see how a governess

is to be introduced into a bachelor's establishment . . . . But there are ways and means of managing things,' he went on, in a sanguine tone. 'In the first place, I must have him over here. You have always been the boss where those children come in, so I thought it might be better if you were to write and arrange about it, if you don't mind. If you have any objection, I'll get Barnett to do it.'

(Barnett was the family solicitor.)

'There's a governess, or some one, isn't there?' Peregrine went on.

'Yes, of course.'

'Well, she might bring him over. I should like him to stay here a day or two, and try how he likes it,' he continued, to his astonished auditor, who sat silent from sheer excess of amazement. 'About writing,' he added. 'Will you do it, or do you object?'

'Oh, I will do it. Only, what am I to say? I can't order Nelly to give up the boy, without rhyme or reason. That would be a fresh cause of offence, with a vengeance.'

'Why, of course, you may be sure I have considered that,' said Peregrine, with sardonic emphasis. 'You are to tell her from me that I am still in the same mind as to living alone, and always shall be, and that I know I can legally take both the children away from her if I like, but I don't. I am reasonable. I want to have the boy, and provided she gives him to me and leaves me in peace, she can have Undermoor to do as she likes with, any establishment she pleases here, and an equal division of income. It isn't as if I wanted a lot of money,' pursued Peregrine, with unvarnished egoism, 'I can't spend it in my state of health, and I'm willing to pay that price for peace and liberty, and the possession of my boy. Tell her this is an informal offer, and that it can all be made square officially afterwards.'

'Well, I will do it,' said Alizon, slowly; and then, with more animation, 'Peregrine, tell me one thing truly; is this idea your own, or did Godfrey Noble put it into your head?'

'It's chiefly my own. He knew long ago that I wanted to have the boy. I was talking about it again, and he said, "Why not?" Then he told me some things—what difficulties she had got herself into, and all that, and that he was convinced it would be all right if she felt herself of a little more importance. It seemed to me reasonable—in fact, I wonder none of us ever thought of it before. And so, between us, we concocted this scheme. As for you, Alizon——'

'Pray make no plans for me,' she said, decisively. 'You are cutting yourself loose from now. Leave me to dispose of myself.'

'By all means,' he assented, with a bow. 'I was not thinking of dictating to you. I only wanted you to see that I hadn't disposed of everything without giving a thought to you. The little house belongs to you, you know, until you get married.'

'I know all about that. Never mind me,' she said, more hurriedly still. 'Would you like me to write about Saxon at once—to-morrow, that is?'

'If you don't mind.'

'Very well. And how soon do you propose to carry out this idea?'

'As soon as he has been here a little while and got accustomed to me. And, of course, I shall have to decide what I am going to do about his education and all that. I should think in a fortnight or three weeks, if there's no confounded difficulties made by the other side.'

'Well,' replied Alizon, almost automatically.

'So, as there's no more to be said, I'll wish you good-night,' pursued he.

'Good-night,' she repeated, with a profound sigh, as she watched him go out of the room.

CHAPTER LI.

FATHER AND SON.

Some days later the result of Alizon's negotiations with Nelly bore fruit. Mrs. Blundell was pleased to find the arrangement suggested as much to her mind as anything could be under the circumstances. She had no objection to go to Undermoor, uneasy though she had felt herself during her former brief reign there. Undermoor, indeed, as she declared, was her rightful place, and she begged to have it understood that she agreed to this settlement as a right, not as a favour. Peregrine laughed a little when he heard that, but he had evidently quite made up his mind in the matter. Alizon, true to her great silent resolve, let things take their course; indeed, she had the stinging conviction that they were taking a much better course now than they had hitherto, under her manipulation, pursued. Peregrine had told Giles, who came to see him one day, what

he had in contemplation. Alizon was present at the interview. Giles agreed that, 'under the circumstances,' as they all said, it was the best thing to be done, but added, with kindly bluntness:

'There's one thing more you ought to do, at the same time: make your will, and settle the future of those children beyond all dispute.'

'Yes,' said Peregrine, 'it's what I intend to do.'

This was explained to Nelly, who, considering all these things, made no objection to parting with her little boy, and, in less than a week after Peregrine had unfolded the matter to Alizon, Miss Smith, her face unusually long and solemn, arrived at Great Undermoor with the eldest of her two pupils. Alizon went to them in the library. She scrutinised little Saxon from head to foot. He was a handsome, sturdy little fellow, more robust and less graceful in build than his father, though he was not clumsy. His large, grey eyes had a sober and steadfast look. He was very resolute in all he undertook, let the object be what it might, from the taming of a wild rocking-horse, to the consumption of enough sugar-plums to make him sick.

'He looks just right,' said Alizon, making a pretence of adjusting his little blue-serge jacket, and ruffling up his bright brown hair, which a too thoughtful nursemaid had plastered down to an unnatural flatness and smoothness. 'And you have brought all his other things as well, Miss Smith,' she added.

'*All* his things,' said Miss Smith, solemnly, 'and his lesson-books, too. He is really doing so nicely, Miss Blundell, in his lessons. I should just like to explain to you——'

'You shall, if you will first excuse me five minutes while I take him upstairs,' said Alizon, looking at the little boy, who was standing contentedly by her side.

He had always been fond of her. She felt her heart beat strongly, with a strange, anxious sensation, as she wondered whether he would please that capricious father, whose latest whim it had been to have him. She dreaded, with almost a physical pain, to see any aversion in Peregrine's eyes, or to hear any coldness in his voice, when the meeting should take place. And why? She scoffed at herself for caring anything about it. But the care was there. It came from her heart, not her head.

'Well,' she decided within herself, 'it has to be. I can do nothing. If anything will keep him constant to one purpose,

or make him consult something more than his own wishes for the moment, it will be this child's presence with him. Poor little man! Little do you think how much I dare to hope from you.' Then, aloud, 'Saxon, dear, I want you to come upstairs with me. I am going to take you to see your papa. You don't remember him, do you?'

Saxon shook his head.

'No. You've seen him, but it is a long time ago. Now you will come with me. Remember, darling, that he isn't very strong, and do whatever he tells you—will you?'

'Oh, yes,' said Saxon, as he willingly put his little hand into hers, and let her lead him upstairs.

'Miss Smith said I was coming to my papa's house. Is this my papa's house?' he asked, as they went along.

'Yes. Do you like it?'

'Yes. I like this house. I like it better than mother's house,' Saxon said, very decidedly and audibly, as they stopped at the door of Peregrine's sitting-room.

Alizon opened the door and led her charge in.

'Peregrine, here is your son,' said she, in a voice which she could scarcely keep steady. 'Go, dear, and speak to your father,' she added.

Peregrine was half-buried in a deep easy-chair, busied with a pile of newspapers and a cigar. He looked up, and his eyes fell upon the figures of his sister and of his little son. Slowly he lifted himself up, and looked at the little boy, who stood still, looking at him. There was a moment's pause, which to Alizon was agonising, and a silence during which they all three looked exceedingly grave, and Saxon clasped her hand very tightly. Then Peregrine began to smile a little, and stretched out his hand in an inviting manner.

'Come here, little man,' he said, 'and tell me how you would like to stay with me.'

Alizon's heart beat suffocatingly. If the child should now turn shy, or begin to cry, or do something irritating or stupid, and so repel his father!

'How I wish I had told him to give him a kiss!' she thought to herself, when, to her intense delight, this was exactly what it occurred to Saxon to do. He walked straight up to Peregrine, took hold of the hand that was stretched out towards him, and, as if it were a matter of course, drew close up to his father and put up his face for a kiss.

A sudden change came over Peregrine's face—over his whole aspect. He clasped the little fellow in his arm, while with one

hand he took his face, turned it towards himself, and looked into it with an indescribable expression, before he gave the expected kiss, saying nothing the while. Then, looking at his sister:

'It's all right, Alizon. We shall get on together. I'll bring him down to lunch when it is ready.'

She knew better than to say a word. She could not have spoken if she had wished to, but went away, closing the door behind her softly. Very slowly she returned to Miss Smith, her mind filled with all kinds of thoughts and wishes and speculations upon what might have been had Peregrine had this companionship years ago.

'But I will not regret,' she decided. 'Perhaps it will make everything much better now, and that will be something.'

CHAPTER LII.

DESPERATE REMEDIES.

It was a dripping evening in December of the same year, and it was the day after Letty Noble's wedding-day. It wanted nearly a week to Christmas, but the holidays had begun a day or two since. Girls and governesses alike had dispersed to their several destinations—home, or to pay visits, or abroad, to get clear away from the school atmosphere. Hilda Noble alone was left, sole tenant of the great building, of which, with all that it contained and implied, she was the head. The class-rooms were shut; the door of communication between them and her own private apartments was locked and bolted. Of all the staff of servants only two were now on the premises; the rest also had gone on their holidays. She was left alone in more senses than one, for up to now there had been an unusual amount of bustle and movement in her life and surroundings.

Since the middle of October Letty had been living with her, busily engaged in preparing her modest outfit, and filling the place with the life and joy of her bright young presence and sunny happiness. Her lover had been constantly, to use his own expression, 'running over' to see her, and discuss the details of their future plans and life. Then had come the wedding itself, the quietest affair imaginable, yet necessarily involving some little stir and excitement. One or two friends

be blunted—the contrast between past and present would not be so hard to bear.

Just at this moment it did not seem as if this were going to be the case, for she was thinking with keenest pain that in all Godfrey had spoken of to her—and he had spoken of many things—he had not once mentioned Alizon's name. She had made a desperate effort, and had asked him:

'Have you not seen her since——'

'I have neither seen nor spoken to her since he went to London,' he had answered, drily.

She had asked no more, but it was of this she was thinking now, and feeling that the pain of it, so far from being less, was, if possible, greater from the consideration of the subject having been so long deferred.

'If Godfrey goes abroad, I don't know how I shall live,' she said to herself. 'Of course he considers that I am not alone. There's Letty—and her husband too, now. I shall have a kind of home, and I will never let him think otherwise. But I know it will be almost useless. Letty does not want a mother any more, and that was all I could be to her.'

All at once, she felt a blast of cold air, and, turning round, saw that the maid had opened the door, and was looking at her. Hilda, feeling a little embarrassed at being thus caught dreaming, sprang to her feet.

'What is it, Mary?'

'A gentleman, ma'am, called to see you; Mr. Ashby. I showed him into the sitting-room. You hadn't said "not at 'ome,"' she added, seeing the startled look on Hilda's face.

'No. I did not expect any one. It does not matter, I will go to him.'

Nevertheless she waited a minute or two, till Mary had quite disappeared, and then took her way slowly along the corridor to the parlour. There, on entering it, she saw indeed Harold Ashby standing on the hearthrug. Mary had lighted the gas, which Hilda rarely used; but her own reading lamp stood on its stand near the fire. Harold had, apparently, been examining the book which she had left on the table, for he put it down now, and instead of saying, 'How do you do?' remarked, with a smile:

'Vauvenargues is all very good reading, but not the most cheerful company, when you are alone, is he?'

'I must say I had not read a word of it,' said Hilda, blushing a little. She held out her hand, and said, 'Won't you sit down?'

'Thank you. I felt almost sure I should find you in at this hour. I have only been in here from London two hours.'

'From London! Did you come from London to-day?'

'Yes.'

'Letty and Mr. Barras went there yesterday,' said Hilda, with a faint smile; 'did you know they were going to spend their honeymoon there?'

Oh, yes. Your brother told me.'

'Oh, of course. I was forgetting he has been seeing you in London. He has gone back to London to-day, too,' she added, with a sudden look at him. 'And I believe he expected to see you.'

'Well, I hope to see him again very soon. My sister will be delighted if he turns up. They are the best of friends.'

'Yes, I know.'

'The wedding is all over, then?' said Harold, with undisturbed serenity; he spoke as if coming over from London to pay a call was no more than coming from somewhere just round the corner.

'Yes, it is over. They have all gone, and left me . . . . But it doesn't matter,' she added, hastily, seeing that he began to look at her. 'Godfrey is coming to me for Christmas.'

'To spend it here, with you? In this very room?' asked Harold.

'Yes, in this very room. Is there something wrong about the room?' she asked, looking round it.

'Forgive me an impertinent question. You can put it down to shameless American inquisitiveness—did you step into this parlour just as it is, or did you arrange it after your own taste?'

'The room itself was none of my designing, of course. It came into the architect's scheme of the school-house, I suppose, and when I came here I was told it was my private sitting-room. They let me also choose my own carpets and curtains and bookcases. The rest of the things are my own, and I put them there. Why, if I may ask?'

'It is like you,' said Harold, smiling to himself, as if hugely diverted, and at the same time pleased, and he looked round the room again.

It was a well-proportioned room, with pleasant windows, and one or two rather deep recesses, such as lend themselves easily to cosy or effective decoration. Its walls were covered with a dullish blue shade of paper, and russet brown curtains draped the windows. The walls on two sides were lined with long

low bookshelves containing many books. On the top of the bookshelves stood a very few ornaments, chiefly copies of some of the most beautiful antique forms, busts and vases. Over the mantelpiece hung the only thing in the room with the faintest touch of sensuousness about it—a large black and white copy of Leonardo's 'Gioconda.' There were two easy-chairs and a rather ascetic uninviting-looking sofa, disposed in different parts of the room. A writing-table stood in one of the windows; a square rather large table was drawn somewhat to one side so as to leave space round the fireplace for smaller tables and chairs. There was not in the room a single pretty or finikin thing; no trace of the hateful painted drain-pipe and tinsel-scarf epidemic. It was cold, it was severe, it was, in its way, admirable.

As Harold still continued to let his eyes wander from one thing to another in it, Hilda said:

'Like me, is it? Like my taste, I suppose you mean? I used to be rather pleased with it.'

'And now you have begun to be displeased with it?'

'No, not with the room. The room is just as it always was. I have not become fond of sixpenny pots and twopenny screens yet. It is other things that make me dissatisfied with—with everything.'

Harold did not reply, but still kept looking round the room, as if he should never be tired of the occupation. At last his eyes met hers, as they returned from her possessions to herself. He half laughed, saying:

'I feel my staring is unpardonable, but—I *like it* so much. It is not like any lady's boudoir I ever saw before.'

It was Hilda's turn to laugh.

'It does not pretend to be a lady's boudoir. It is the sitting-room of a hard-working woman.'

'I sit rebuked. Whatever it is, it pleases my taste uncommonly,' he said, and paused for a moment. Then suddenly and directly, almost as if attacking her, 'You will miss your sister very much.'

'Yes,' said Hilda, while swiftly and darkly the shadow again spread itself over her face.

'Has Noble told you he is coming out with us?'

'He told me something about it,' said Hilda, uneasily. An uncomfortable conviction as to whither these preliminaries were guiding the conversation could not be kept out of her mind. For a moment thought was busy in devising methods of escape from what was coming; then all at once came the

resolve to let it come, and have it over, once for all. She looked at Harold with a cold, grave glance, as she added: 'He was only here for one night, and there was so much to be done and talked about. But I understand that you and Mrs. Van Bibber had invited him to stay with you, and that he was going.'

'Yes, that is true. We feel certain he could find an opening with us, where he would be valued as he deserves. It is too absurd to think of him wasting himself in a little country village in England. Besides, if he didn't succeed at first, he has a long time before him.'

'Yes. . . . I think it is right for him to go. But do you suppose Godfrey is one of the people who will ever make a fortune?'

'I don't know, I'm sure. He can make friends. You will be left rather alone, won't you?'

'That cannot be helped. I have plenty of work.'

'An infallible receipt for happiness, isn't it?'

'If you give it time enough it will always bring contentment, I am certain. Happiness is too much to be looked for—as a permanent thing.'

'You are a pessimist, I see. I don't agree with you in the least. Other changes have been taking place too,' said Harold, marshalling his facts with some amount of generalship. 'Your friend, Miss Blundell, will be in almost as solitary a condition as yourself as regards her domestic affairs. You know her brother has left Undermoor and gone to London?'

'Godfrey told me,' she said, almost inaudibly.

'And that she, too, has to leave Undermoor to make place for Mrs. Blundell and her establishment?'

'I suppose so. Mr. Ashby, forgive me, but I can't talk about it,' she said, in an unsteady voice. 'I know you don't mean to give me pain.' (Harold cast down his eyes—it was exactly what he did mean to do.) 'I'll talk about anything else you like, but not about that.'

'You place me in a painful dilemma. I came on purpose to talk to you about something, and how I'm to do it without talking about that I do not know. May I not say just one thing more?'

'Well, say as little as you can about it,' she said, unwillingly.

'It is only this. Nesta and I left Moorside about a month ago—after Mr. Blundell had gone. Before leaving, I called upon Miss Blundell to say good-bye to her, and to thank her for the hospitality I had received from them; and to proffer her

our hospitality should she ever find herself on our side the water.'

'And did you see her?' asked Hilda, eagerly leaning forward, and having quite forgotten her command to him to speak of anything but that.

The young man commanded his countenance very creditably, looking as if he did not notice this sudden access of eager interest.

'Certainly I saw her. She was most kind to me, as she always has been. She gave me tea and talked with me for a long time.'

'How did she look?'

'Oh, she looked well, but grave. I am very sorry for her. I think she had hard lines with that brother of hers, who is a selfish, unfeeling brute, if ever there was one, under all his fine external polish, which I admit was dazzling,' said Harold, who was certainly taking the utmost advantage of the interest he had succeeded in rousing. Hilda winced visibly, and he saw it, but seemed as if he did not see it. She was in agony, but her thirst to hear more was stronger than the agony, and she listened breathlessly. 'She did her best for him, and for them all, in her impetuous way, and did not succeed too well. Then comes a smash up. He cuts himself adrift from her, consulting his own convenience only, and leaves her to fend for herself. She was not very explicit as to what she was going to do, but I gathered that she thought of making Little Undermoor her headquarters. She seemed to think that from there she might have some influence over her little niece; all for his sake, of course—a great deal more than he deserves.'

Hilda made no answer, save a profound sigh. Her cheek was flushed, and she looked reflectively into the fire. At last she turned and put the question which Harold had hoped, but hardly expected to hear.

'Did she speak of me?' she asked.

'She did not speak of you. That is, she did not begin to speak of you, but I did.'

'She—I behaved ill to her. I deceived her, and she does not forgive,' said Hilda, as much to herself as to him.

'You were very fond of her?'

'Was!' echoed Hilda. She struggled with her unwillingness to speak of this thing, with her pride, with her reserve, but Harold had admitted that Alizon had conversed with him about her. She could not leave the subject. 'You say you spoke about me. She let you talk about me, then?'

'Oh, yes.'

'And answered you?'

'Why, certainly.'

She smoothed the hem of her handkerchief nervously. It appeared an eternity before Harold said:

'You want to know what she said about you?'

'I think I do, and yet——'

'It was nothing bad,' he told her, as he rose from his chair and came and stood near her. 'I will tell you exactly what it was. But why should I beat about the bush? Have you forgotten what I said to you at Askley Bridge that night?'

'No.'

'Nor have I. Not for a day. Not for an hour. You didn't love me then. Your thoughts were under the influence of some one else. You don't love me now, I fancy, but your thoughts are free from that influence. Isn't it so?'

'I wonder who told you all this,' she said, raising her head, almost indignantly. 'And this is not telling me what she said. That is what I want to hear.'

'I'm quite aware of that. You see, you will not listen to me for my own sake, so I have to make the most of whatever means I have of compelling your attention. I'm coming presently to what she said. When a man is as much in earnest about a thing as I am about this, he will find out, somehow or other, all that it is necessary for him to know. After that talk with Miss Blundell, I knew a great deal more than she could possibly imagine she had told me. I knew that you were alone, and would be more alone. I made up my mind that if I couldn't get what I wanted from you, under ordinary circumstances, I would try what extraordinary ones would bring about. I speak plainly, you see. You don't hate me, do you?' he broke off suddenly.

'I soon shall, if you do not tell me what you promised to tell me.'

'I see. Well, amongst other things I told her I had proposed to you ever so long ago, and you had refused me. She did not know, but she was not surprised, she said. I then told her I meant to ask you again; she smiled and wished me prosperity in my suit.'

'What else could she do?' asked Hilda, unable to control the signs of her agitation. Despite her words, what she had heard had struck home.

'That was what she did say, anyhow. You say you don't hate me. You are lonely and sad, and you are going to be

more lonely and sad. You know you aren't the sort of woman who can go on without help or companionship. Trust yourself to me and the future. It will come right. Everything that I put my hand to comes right with me.'

'No, no!' she began.

'Yes, make up your mind to throw over all this,' he waved his hand round the room, 'all this that is here, and with which you are no longer satisfied—you said so—all these things that are making you unhappy and sick at heart, and leave them and marry me, and come home with Nesta and me. You may believe me, it is the medicine for your troubled mind.'

'I told you then, I *could* not.'

'And I told you then that I did not see why you could not. I see it still less, now. Hilda'—she had stood up and was standing with her hands on the mantelpiece, looking into the fire—he stood beside her, and went on without any softening concealment—'without trifling and without shirking facts, facts which stare you in the face, will you tell me that you feel strong enough to let your brother go away, to be alienated from your friends, to let us go away, who want you so much, and to stay on here yourself, alone, for all the work you may say you have to do? Tell me that.'

'If one must, one must.'

'There is no "must" about it. If it were a case of "must," you would try it, and die, or go melancholy of it in a short time. That's your nature. You don't want to die, though you are unhappy. To be melancholy means to be mad. That is worse than death. What I propose would be better, and you will see it if you will think of it for a moment. You will come with me, and try if I'm not right. You will very soon get to believe in me, whatever you may do now. Belief is half the battle. What I prophesy will come true. You will yet love your life, and love me for having made you take it up when you had almost begun to despair.'

'It would be doing you such a frightful wrong; because, suppose I did try, and failed, there is no going back from it.'

'If it would be a wrong, I am asking you to do me that wrong. If it should turn out to be a wrong, I shall have courted it and brought it upon myself. But I refuse to admit for one instant that it will be a wrong. You shall live out there—live your own life, and go your own way—with the one trifling drawback of having me for your husband, you know. I'm afraid, or rather I'm delighted, to feel that that is a *sine qud non* in the matter.'

She stood in miserable, perturbed silence, still gazing into the fire, but at last said, decisively:

'No, it is impossible. You do not know what makes me unhappy, nor what a weak-minded fool I am—you know nothing about it, and I am not going to tell you. Let us leave it. Let there be an end to it.'

'I do know. I know everything,' said Harold, who perceived that the time had come for him to play trumps, and who now proceeded to do so with a liberal hand.

'You do not—excuse me!'

'I do—excuse me! I heard it all from Miss Blundell that day.'

'She told you?' gasped Hilda.

'She told me—because I asked her, of course.'

'You asked her?'

She felt as if she had become a mere surprised echo.

'Yes. When I had told her that I meant to ask you again, I also informed her that I thought she could clear up a point or two, as to which I was in doubt. And I asked her point-blank, as it was a matter of so much importance to me, if there had been something between her brother and you. There's no need to take on in that way about it,' pursued Harold, gently touching her shoulder, for she had laid her head upon her arms, and neither spoke nor moved. 'She admitted it. Of course I couldn't tell her what I thought of her brother, and we went into no details. Blood is thicker than water, I suppose, so she did not denounce him as he deserved, but I gathered that the brute had insulted you, and that in consequence there had been some coldness between you and her.'

'Oh, *don't*,' groaned Hilda.

'I'm awfully sorry, but I must, if it is to be put straight. I let her see I did not care two straws for anything that had passed between you and him. I thanked her for her candour, and said I should persevere, and then, as I told you, she wished me prosperity in my suit.'

'Mr. Ashby,' said Hilda, suddenly standing erect again, and facing him with her unhappy eyes looking from her pale face, 'tell me now the truth. My whole future depends upon it, and you say you wish for my happiness. If you deceive me now, I should find it out, and I could never forgive it. She wished you prosperity in your suit?'

'She wished me prosperity in my suit.'

'She did not say anything about me?'

'She said nothing about you.'

'She did not express the least wish about me—that I might be happy, or—or anything like that?'

'Not one word like that did she send.'

'She made no comment? She did not say she was grieved at our separation? That there had been a dreadful mistake—that I had been weak rather than wicked?'

'She did not.'

'Tell me what she did say.'

'She said: "This is a matter which I do not care to talk about, but under the circumstances you had a perfect right to ask me these questions. I have answered them truly. As you are still determined to persevere, I am sure I wish you prosperity in your suit." I may have changed the turn of a phrase here and there, but those were her words. And after that your name was not again mentioned.'

'And knowing this—the whole thing—that I made a horrible mess of my affairs, and laid myself open to that insult you speak of, and that I should marry you'—['Shall marry you,' Harold breathed between his closed lips]—'because I'm miserable, and would do anything to get away from all this, you stand there and repeat what you have said?'

'You may consider every word of it repeated,' he answered, gravely, holding out his right hand.

He showed no change of expression. He did not dare to risk a look, however slight, of exultation; but Hilda had gone very white. Her lips hardly moved, as she very slowly lifted her own hand and placed it within his, saying in a whisper:

'I am certain I am mad to do it. But I shall do it. I will marry you when you like.'

'And I will see that you are glad you did so,' he said, lifting her hand to his lips. 'Trust me for that,' he added, looking intently at her. 'Now I have your promise, and I shall never doubt it. To-morrow morning you'll hate me, but you will never go back from your word.'

'Never. I have tried once what it was to break faith and fall short of what was expected of me. There's nothing in life that can make it worth while ever to do it again.'

He saw that he was certain now of her carrying out her part of the bargain. This might in some respects be the Hilda Noble to whom he had made an offer about three months ago, but in some other, and those vital, respects it was another woman altogether. His deep-toned assurance to her that she should never repent having made this promise was the only semblance of lovers' words that passed between them. It was in quite a dry, matter-of-fact manner that he said, presently:

'I won't stay any longer now. I am sure you must want to be alone. You say your brother is coming down to spend

Christmas with you. I hope I shall be able to persuade you to go back with me, and let us all spend it together in London. Not if you don't wish,' he added, but not in any tone of hurried recantation of his words. It was this absolute calm and confidence, without noise or bluster, that had overcome Hilda's resistance. 'Heaven forbid that I should urge you to do what would be distasteful to you, after what you have promised me. But I may call to-morow, perhaps, and talk this over?'

'Yes—oh, yes.'

'Very well. To-morrow afternoon. And you said—when I liked. Did you mean it?'

'I meant it, and mean it,' she said, her face setting again into something like hardness.

'Then I shall not need to give you much trouble about arranging things. I will tell you exactly what I would do, and you shall alter anything that may not suit you. Good-night,' he added, gently, and with a grave smile.

'Good-night,' rejoined Hilda, almost inaudibly. In another moment she was alone. She had not even asked him where he was staying.

Left to herself, she began to move about the room, and mechanically to put aside books and papers, and prepare for going to her room. She made pauses every now and then, and stood still, looking as if she were listening to some one talking. She was saying to herself:

'Letty was married yesterday. I'm to be married to-morrow, it seems—or what is almost the same thing. And I'm to go away to America, and live there and do what I like. Do what I *like*, forsooth!' She laughed to herself. 'Forget my troubles and—well, I will behave as a grateful wife should, if he will only take me away from this. He was quite right. When they had all gone, I don't think I could have borne it. I should have done something dreadful. But I have been *made* to do it,' she suddenly thought, coming to another pause in her proceedings. 'I hate to be made to do things. What have I done?' She stood still, with a storm of uneasy, angry feelings in her heart, and then suddenly setting her teeth, said aloud:

'She never said she hoped I should be happy. She wished *him* prosperity. I am sure he spoke the truth. I wonder if she hopes I shall be miserable. If I am, it shall not be where she can know anything about it.'

CHAPTER LIII.

AS TO DESPATCHING A CABLEGRAM.

'WELL, Harold!'

'Well, Hilda!'

'I think you really might give me a little advice. I'm simply distracted to know what to do.'

"You are mighty easily distracted then,' was the unkind rejoinder.

'Do you mean to say that you know exactly what you would do in such an emergency as this?'

'Why, yes, I should hope so.'

'Then pray tell me what!' she urged him, with eagerness.

'Cable.'

'How can I explain things in a cable?'

'Don't explain them. Explanations always get things into a muddle.'

'Well' (insinuatingly), 'as you have committed yourself so far, you might just go a little farther, and tell me what, exactly, I should cable.'

'Heaven forbid! I might be accused afterwards of having got everything wrong. No, cable and say what you please.'

He had been sitting at the table, turning over the pages of the morning's paper. The room was the dining-room of their own house in New York, where, in spite of Mrs. Van Bibber's wonder at their bad taste, they had settled themselves. The hour was eleven in the forenoon; the time was December, a year after their engagement. Harold looked tranquil; his wife looked anxious. At this juncture he, concealing a smile, rose. She interposed, hastily.

'You must not go out now. You must see me through this, at any rate. Sit down again this moment.'

The smile would no longer be concealed, but he obeyed her behest.

'Do you mean to tell me,' Hilda proceeded, solemnly, 'that on the strength of my brother being ill of fever, and rambling in his talk, and constantly asking for her, I am to cable to Alizon Blundell to come to New York?'

'If you think my words will bear any other construction, pray give it them. I don't see it myself.'

'Well! What kind of a message?'

'You are not too distracted to compose one for yourself. She is your friend, not mine.'

'How wretched of you to say such a thing. Must I say "Godfrey very ill. He says you must know about it." It is too absurd.'

'The truth often sounds absurd. He is very ill. He does say she must know about it. What's more, he talks as if he had a right to send for her. Did you ever know him to tell a lie?'

'Not when he was in his sane mind. But I never know when he is now, and when he isn't. He does wander a great deal. And all this time, for a whole year, he has never hinted at such a thing.'

'Children and madmen speak the truth.'

'You are beyond everything exasperating; and there is no time to be lost.'

'Then what are you waiting for? As soon as you give me the message, I'll go right straight along to the bureau and send it myself.'

'Give me the writing things, then,' she said, in the tone of one who has made up her mind. But she watched him the while with a wary eye.

In silence he spread the things before her on the table, dipped a pen into the ink, and put it into her hand.

'There! Fire away!'

She dated the form, and began to write; then suddenly laid down her pen.

'Harold!' (with solemnity). 'Suppose it should be summoning her on a wild-goose chase. Suppose he should be all wrong, poor fellow, and only talking as if what he wishes were true! I should have "given him away," as you are always saying (I shall catch that expression from you soon), for nothing.'

'I have a strong impression that you have caught it already, despite your Greek and Latin. Now, listen! You send this message, she receives it. She will come on no wild-goose chase. She's too level-headed for that, with all her impulsiveness. If there's nothing in all this, she will soon let you know, and he never need know anything about it. She must have known for long enough that he was hopelessly gone on her. She will not give him away, whatever you may have to do. If, moreover, there is anything in it, and there has been some understanding between them, you have no right to keep it from her. You must do the best that circumstances allow, and that is the best.'

'Perhaps it is,' she admitted, taking up her pen again. 'There! Will that do?'

'*G. N. very ill. Says you must know.—Hilda.*'

'Well, to be sure! Try something a little more explicit than that, my dear.'

'On my word, Harold, I cannot. I hate to address her at all, or ask her for anything, and put him at her mercy in that way.'

She looked at him with tears of vexation in her eyes.

'Oh, well, let us try what the two of us can do, if we put our heads and hands together,' said Harold, gravely drawing his chair up beside hers, and taking a new form.

He put the pen into her hand again, and took it into his own, as old-fashioned teachers used to do when 'guiding the hand of a child bewildered by its pothooks and hangers.

'How ridiculous!' she said, unable to help laughing. 'I shall let your thoughts be written down. I'm a passive medium.'

'Much the best,' said Harold, slowly and laboriously guiding her hand. 'We must make it legible, or they will say something rude at the bureau.'

The process of concocting the message took an inordinately long time, but at last it was finished, and ran:—

'*To Miss Blundell, Askley Bridge, Kirkfence, England.—My brother G. very ill; typhoid fever. Physicians fear great danger. He asks for you constantly. What must I say to him? —Hilda Ashby.*'

'I call that a letter, not a telegram,' said she.

'Call it what you like, if it effects its object,' replied Harold, looking as if he had greatly enjoyed the labour of composing it. 'It is done now, if it meets your sovereign approval.'

'It could not be better.'

'What a reassuring thing for me to know. I will now go and despatch it. In a short time it will be in the lady's hands. She should get it about five o'clock by their time. We can have an answer here this afternoon. This is Thursday. She will have Friday in which to prepare, Saturday she can set off. In eight days, or nine, she can be here. He has not been ill a week, so it will be all right. It is a fine opportunity for her.'

'You may think so What a state I shall be in till we get her answer!'

'Don't get into "states," as you are always saying. I shall be catching that expression from you. Now I'll go.'

'You are so good,' said Mrs. Ashby, taking her husband's hand into her own, and stroking it gently.

'You are so foolish,' said Mr. Ashby, arresting the hand and kissing it, with a smile; then, taking the message in his hand, he left the room to take it, as he said, to the bureau, and despatch it.

Scarcely had Harold gone than a tap at the door roused Hilda from the dream, or whatever it was, into which she had fallen after he had gone, as she still sat at the table, her arms upon it, and gazed out of the window at the 'brown stone front' opposite.

'Come in,' said she, and rose. A nurse, in a cap and apron, came into the room.

'My patient is very restless, Mrs. Ashby,' she said: 'he keeps asking for you, and saying that other name. He is never in quite such trouble about it when you are there, if you could come for a little while?'

'Yes, I will come at once,' she said, following the nurse upstairs, to the top of the many storied house, to where, before a door, hung a curtain soaked in carbolic, shutting out the sick-room from the rest of the house.

It was the room in which Godfrey, nearly a week ago, had been taken ill. Since then it had been stripped of its curtains and carpet, and the large wooden bed which had stood in it had been removed and replaced by a little iron hospital bed, on which he lay, tossing about in the fever which he had contracted, no one could say how, unless from some patient or patients whom he had attended.

It was a year now, within a few days, of the day on which Harold had, almost by force, persuaded Hilda to marry him, and trust to him and the future. She had kept her word. They had been married a fortnight before they all left England for America. As may have been perceived, the young man's confident prediction that all would go well had proved true in the end.

Before all had gone well, there had been a period when the relations had been very much strained; when things had looked very black; when Hilda, in the reaction from the excitement of her desperate remedy, and in the overpowering consciousness that what she had done was irrevocable, had tormented herself almost into a nervous illness with the constant fear that she had done wrong in yielding to that persuasion. She had

elt a kind of resentment; had had a sort of feeling that she had been taken advantage of, and entrapped into a lifelong imprisonment.

Very little had been needed to bring about a complete rupture. Poor Mrs. Van Bibber, watching it all with sickening anxiety, had more than once made up her mind that what she had dimly dreaded when Harold had declared his intention of marrying this girl was going to be confirmed—that it was all going wrong—how wrong she did not dare to think. She had not, however, known her brother thoroughly.

The young American, in taking that particular course, had by no means reckoned without his host. He had expected to have difficulties to contend with. Here they were—difficulties of a kind which stimulated his calm, determined, ordinarily indifferent nature to the full extent of its capacities. His sheet-anchor in the matter was the absolute certainty that there was at least no rival to himself in his wife's affections; strong in this knowledge, he went his way, and managed his own affairs, and hers, with a tact, a firmness, a delicacy, and, above all, with a perfect patience and generosity which must in time have had its effect upon a colder, less sensitive nature than Hilda's.

One trifle after another, and the steady everyday consistency in his behaviour, had gradually drawn her attention from herself to him. Observation and interest meant appreciation. With Hilda appreciation was apt to be very keen. When she thoroughly comprehended what the kind of life and love was, that was surrounding her with its influence, appreciation became gratitude—gratitude became a passion of self-reproach, and an effort, which soon was no effort at all, but a habit as inseparable as breathing or thinking, to be as nearly as possible as much for him as he was for her. It was an old-fashioned, stupid way of viewing the matter, no doubt; wanting in spirit and intellect, humdrum in the extreme, to first feel gratitude to your husband, and then fall in love with him; but circumstances were favourable to that development of the situation; it did so develop, and the results were excellent. The difficulties were now over. She had told him of every stage of her weakness and unhappiness during that momentous long vacation, and there was peace where there had been sorrow and strain, if not strife. Harold's was one of those natures whose possessions once won, are held ever more tenaciously, loved ever more deeply.

Mrs. Van Bibber now breathed freely; but always, in looking

back upon that first half-year or so of danger, she had a little shudder of pained recollection—the shadow of the suspense through which she had passed, while trembling for the fate of Harold's happiness. For a little time she had lived with them in the hotel at New York, where they stayed till Harold and Hilda set up for themselves. Then she had betaken herself to her beloved Baltimore, where she was at home and happy.

Godfrey had at first gone into lodgings which he said were suited to his means and prospects, but had gone to live in his sister's home as soon as she was settled in it. It had appeared as if his talents had freer play here than they had ever got at home. From what cause soever he had done well from the first, and, during that year, had succeeded in establishing a footing even in crowded New York. There seemed to be every prospect of his making his way, and, though he was undoubtedly seriously ill now, they trusted to good nursing and his own strong constitution to pull him through.

On the very morning of the day on which he had been taken ill a letter had arrived from Letty to Hilda, in which she had told them that, a few days before, Peregrine Blundell, after a bad attack of *angina*, had been found by his servant dead in bed. The news had come with some shock to Godfrey, in spite of his intimate knowledge that such an end was quite what might have been expected. He had said little at the time, though he had seemed very thoughtful. Hilda had told the news, briefly enough, to him and to her husband, and had not alluded to the subject again. The end had perhaps wiped out his offence—its effects were potent in her whole life, and would influence her till she died.

As the fever rose in height, Godfrey's mind had begun to wander. He had rambled on about many things, and at last about Alizon, whose name, when first pronounced by him in his delirium, in a tone which revealed to Hilda the inmost depths of his heart, had thrilled her and haunted her for days afterwards. Once having begun to call upon her, he returned so persistently to the subject that the result had been the despatch of that momentous cablegram this morning. Hilda had truly said that she could not always distinguish between his rational and irrational utterances. He would talk nonsense in so calm and composed a fashion, and anon would discourse what sounded like sense with such an excited aspect, and such restlessness and disturbance, that she was bewildered. He had assured her last night, in language of perfect coherence, that

before leaving England he had seen Alizon, and that they had agreed they would some day or other 'take up our lives together,' to use his own expression. They had both decided that they would know very well when that day should have come. He felt very ill. Perhaps it never would come, in this world, but if he might but see her once, and speak to her, it was all right; he did not mind how things went.

'She's in my very soul!' then he began to say, as his eyes again took their unrecognising stare, and his head began to restlessly move again.

The message had been sent. Harold seemed very confident. Hilda was full of doubt. At least she could say nothing decided to him until some kind of an answer should have been received. It seemed very long till Harold came back from sending the message. It seemed longer still, as she sat in the twilight of the winter afternoon, till he called to her to come out to him, and she found him with the fateful envelope in his hand.

With shaking fingers she tore it open, and read in a whisper:

'*Tell him I am coming to him. He is to wait for me. Sail Saturday, Adriatic.—A. Blundell.*'

'Then it is true!' she ejaculated, looking at Harold, with wide-open eyes.

'Something seems to be true,' he rejoined, with a half-smile. 'Come along. It will settle him a little if he knows.'

They entered the room. Godfrey's attention had been arrested by Hilda's sudden departure from his bedside. He looked at them, and his eyes fell at once upon the paper of the telegram.

'Well, what does she say?' he asked, quite calmly.

'She is coming, dear Godfrey. See for yourself,' said Hilda, putting the paper into his hand, and reading it out to him. He followed it with attention, and then said:

'Saturday. The *Adriatic* is a racer. Eight days will do it. It's all right. She never breaks a promise,' and immediately began to talk nonsense again.

The days passed, they knew not whether quickly or slowly—it seemed both. The fever was at its height, and had still some days to run before the crisis should come; the danger would be from exhaustion afterwards, should he come out of it alive. This was the state of things when, just after lunch on

Christmas Eve, word was brought to Harold that the *Adriatic* had passed Sandy Hook, and was expected every moment at the wharf.

CHAPTER LIV.

ACROSS THE WATER.

'You will be sure to make her understand that she is welcome,' said Mrs. Ashby, with some anxiety, to her husband, as she stood watching him while he drew on his thick gloves—for it was a bitterly cold day—and put on his heavy great-coat, preparatory to setting off for the docks.

'Are you under the impression that I shall make her understand that we simply receive her on sufferance?'

'Oh, no! But you know you have said some rather sharp things about her, once or twice.'

'And, in short, you thoroughly mistrust me, and wish you were going yourself, instead,' said Harold, making light of it, though he was not without some little wonder and anxiety on his own part with regard to the coming meeting between his wife and her quondam friend.

Of course, to Harold it appeared that Peregrine Blundell's behaviour to Hilda had been that of a cur, and that there was nothing more to be said about it. He made allowance for Alizon's indulgence to the man, he being her brother, and so dependent upon her, but he had never quite forgiven her her treatment of Hilda, and the one point on which he would never listen to anything that the latter might have to say was when she attempted to throw any blame upon herself in the matter. It touched her profoundly, and she had ceased to speak to him of it, but it convinced her not at all, and perhaps it was just as well, for her soul's health, that it should not convince her.

'It is stupid of me to think so much about it,' said Hilda, nervously; 'but I do, and I can't help it.'

'Ah,' said Harold, smiling indulgently, 'you know, my dear, you are one of the people whom other people call "a peculiar temperament," because they can make nothing of them. That means, that you take immense things as if they were trifles, and trifles as if they were immensities. It's not a good working-day temperament, but it gets along pretty well when it has for husband a stolid nerveless lump who——'

'Go—do! Don't waste time in lecturing me,' she bade him;

and followed him into the hall, and watched while he with a smile got into the *coupé* that was waiting and drove off.

He smiled again as he let down the glass to admit the keen frosty afternoon air. The whole city was astir, alive and alert with people making their preparations for the following day. They, of course, had none to make, since Godfrey's illness had cut off all possibility of entertaining or being entertained.

Harold pulled his moustache reflectively.

'Well, she is coming. It is a queer story. She must have had some understanding with the poor old fellow. But whether she comes for anything but to see him die——'

Hilda went upstairs again, to the sick-room, to wait. Godfrey had now been ill rather more than a fortnight, and the fever, even under the most favourable conditions, had still several days to run before what the nurses called 'the turn' could come. He was seldom fully conscious now. Hilda had learned from his wandering talk many a thing which had gone down to the depths of her heart, and had made her love him more than she had ever done before, though the bond between them had always been strong. She had, as it were, traced his life's history, since the time of his first misunderstanding with his mother about his choice of a profession. There was endless rambling about classes and lectures and hospital experiences, jumbled up with later things, allusions to herself and her success, which he had evidently compared with his own want of success, sorrowing over the matter, but with never a bitter word or breath of envy. Was it a want of mental or moral backbone which had prevented him from ever even beginning to 'get on'? Hilda asked herself, and indignantly replied to herself that it was not. It was a want of that nobly developed selfishness, the results of which we have agreed are so good and so precious, and the full and perfect flower of which may be seen any day flourishing like a green bay-tree in the shape of the modern Practical Man.

When his wanderings began about Askley Bridge and Burton, Peregrine and Alizon, she felt it almost too much for her; and when he uttered Alizon's name, in those thrilling tones, she felt as if she were eavesdropping, and must stop her ears. This afternoon she listened to a good deal of it; then he suddenly turned to her:

'She could not do a mean thing if she tried. She is very passionate—yes, exceedingly passionate. It is a fault. I never said it was not a fault. What would she be without her faults?

Nothing—to me! "Why need you go abroad?" you know she said to me: "Why need you go abroad?" and I told her, because it was too unequal. "It's all your nasty pride."' He laughed and looked at Hilda. 'She said so. And perhaps it was. I said I was going. And it will always be the same. We can never come together on equal terms. If I succeed here, how can I go away and leave it all? Hilda' (with a perfectly rational voice and expression), 'Peregrine is dead, isn't he? Didn't some one say so?'

'Yes, dear; Letty said so.'

'And the children went to live with Alizon, because their mother bolted with some one. Wasn't that it?'

'No, no! They are all at Undermoor now, you know; Alizon and all the rest of them.'

He frowned; then burst out laughing.

'Oh, Burton; what an ass—what an ass he is, isn't he? And little Miss Shaw shying her medicine bottles at him. He told her to take digitalis—no! How was it? I gave him nitrate of amyl, and she said, "Why didn't it do, when I tried it?" *How* was it?'

Then he got hopelessly puzzled, and she got hopelessly sad, till at last, after what appeared an interminable time, and, when it was quite dark outside, she heard a step outside the door, and Harold's voice called to her softly.

In an instant she had joined him without, and was looking at him, unable to speak.

'Well, dear,' he said, 'I found her all right, and I took her straight to the library, and said I would send you to her. I thought, all things considered, you would prefer to meet her alone. I'll sit with him a bit. And you will remember that only if it is all right is she to come upstairs to him!'

'Oh, yes! I will go. Let me go now, or I shall not be able to go at all.'

She ran down to the next floor, and, without giving herself a second for reflection or hesitation, opened the door of their favourite upstairs sitting-room, the library, and went in.

In many a dream, many a castle in the air, she had gone through this meeting, and pictured it, and wondered if it would ever come to pass. Now, when it came, everything she had expected to rush into her mind remained out of it, and only one insignificant point impressed itself vividly upon her consciousness—the fact, namely, that Alizon was dressed in deep mourning, and that it made her look very different from anything Hilda had ever seen her look like before. A long, heavy,

black travelling cloak, lined and bordered with fur, completely enveloped her figure, and her pale face and light hair showed in striking contrast to this sable attire and her equally sable headgear.

She was standing quite still, looking intently towards the door, and, when Hilda came in, she looked at her but did not move. Hilda closed the door behind her, and, thankful that her position as hostess gave her the right to speak first, said, gently: 'You are welcome to my home.'

'And to you?' asked Alizon, looking at her.

'To me you have always been the same.'

'That means——' said Alizon, hesitating, and then putting out both her hands. 'Hilda, have you forgiven me?'

'Forgiven you!' echoed Hilda, with a low sob of joy, as she moved towards her, and in another moment their hands were clasped fast in each other's, and their eyes met and read each in the other's that the clouds had disappeared. It was all that was said, till Hilda observed:

'Let it all be as if it had not been.'

'That it can never be, my dear,' replied the other, in her old decided tones. 'When such a thing has happened, and such suffering has been gone through, it isn't meant to be forgotten. It is only meant not to happen again. You know the reason of all this?' (She swept her hand over her black raiment.)

'Yes,' said Hilda, who, with slender white fingers which fumbled (perhaps purposely) over their task, was trying to unfasten the clasps of Alizon's cloak.

The latter with a smile stopped the fingers in their work, undid the clasp, and cast her cloak away. Then taking Hilda's hands into her own: 'Now tell me about him. Your husband says he is dangerously ill. May I go to him?'

'He is dangerously ill. You must forgive me for seeming to bring you to book, as it were, the instant you get into the house, but it's just like this—this is what I could not explain in the telegram. If there is anything real between you and him, you are to go and see him, and be with him just as much as you please. But if there is nothing, and he has only been dreaming, and speaking as if what he wishes were what it is to be, then, though you have come all this way, you are not to go near him. The disappointment, when he comes round, would be too great. Do you see?'

'Oh, I see,' said Alizon. 'How like your old distrustful self! Did you think I was coming here to make a fool of him, and a goose of myself, and to be in your way when he is ill,

all for nothing. I suppose, from what you say, that while he was well he never told you of our last interview at Undermoor?'

'No, he never did,' replied Hilda, seized with a great, thoroughly mundane curiosity.

'Ah!' Alizon nodded. 'Let me go to him now. He must not die, and he will not die. I must see him, and another time I'll tell you all about it. It is all right. You may trust me for that. We thoroughly understood each other when we parted.'

In silence, puzzled but reassured, Hilda led her upstairs. Alizon had thrown aside her little travelling-cap, and, with at least outward composure, followed Hilda, and they entered the sick-room together. Harold was sitting beside the bed. The nurse sat in a chair near the stove, her hands folded on her lap, on her face a kind but quite unemotional expression. She was too accustomed to such things to be disturbed by them.

As they came in, Harold stood up, and Godfrey's eye fell upon them. His mutterings and restless movements of the head were suddenly arrested. He gazed fixedly at them. Harold moved aside. Hilda gently pushed Alizon to the front. She walked up to the bedside, laid her strong firm hand on the hot one which had been restlessly plucking at the sheet, and stooped down.

'Godfrey, I have come to you. The time has come. Are you glad to see me?' she said, and pressed her lips upon his forehead.

'Alizon!' he said, after quite a long pause, during which he looked at her, and in a startlingly natural voice. 'Hilda said you were coming. You are not a dream, are you? I've had so many dreams just lately.'

'A pretty substantial dream, as you will find,' said she, laughing softly, as she seated herself beside him, and still kept hold of his hand.

He looked at her curiously, and with a smile, for a moment or two. Then, all at once, his brain was again clouded over; the mutterings and restlessness began again. Evidently it made no difference, at present, whether she was there or not. She remained, however, in her place, leaving it only to have some dinner, and returning immediately afterwards. She shared the night-nurse's watch, and thus it continued to be till the crisis came which was to decide his fate for death or for life.

He did not die, but slept himself out of danger into a feeble but real life; and then came convalescence, and one afternoon,

when Harold was with him, and the two women were sitting over the library fire, came the explanation which Alizon had promised to give to Hilda.

'I want to tell you about it,' she said, 'because the day will come soon when I must go home again, and something will have to be settled. He came to see me, you must know, in his punctilious way, on his last evening at Askley Bridge—after your sister's wedding.'

'Yes—the very night before Harold came and talked to me,' said Hilda, with a nod.

'Momentous occasions for us both, I perceive,' said Alizon, drily. 'He had forgotten to restore to me that precious key of the woods and ponds, don't you know? Whether he had forgotten it on purpose I cannot say, but to that key I owe the present state of things; and to that key you owe the inestimable pleasure of my presence in your house at this moment. You must know that, except the most ordinary, armed-neutrality "how-do-you-do's," we had never exchanged a word since——'

Hilda nodded.

'And yet he had been so good. He had driven me to despair by his goodness. He went with Peregrine to London, because it really was not safe for him to travel alone, and he saw him settled, but he never came to tell me about it afterwards, and I had no longer any right to send for him. Then time went on. He left *Little Undermoor*, and went back to his rooms at Moorside, you know, and I gradually made the remarkable discovery that it would not suit me at all to break with him. In fact, I felt that I could not get on at all without him. I never was so wretched in my life. How was I to act? You'll own that it was a dilemma. I knew in my heart that he cared for me. I know when people care for me. But he is so proud and sensitive, he would rather have died than tell me he wanted to marry me—and my money. That's what he would have tormented himself about. Then, too, there was all this miserable misunderstanding about other things. I knew he could not say anything. Reluctantly I made up my mind that, being quite convinced what would make my happiness and what, I hoped, would make his, I was not going to let it all slip without an effort. I must—must show him his duty.'

'Oh, this is too thrilling! How often I have wondered how it was done. How did you manage it?'

'Well,' said Alizon, spreading out her hand to the blaze, 'when he called with that key, and to say good-bye, and thank

me for past favours, I realised that now was the time—or never! I fear I was pretty hard on him. When I come to think of it, I am sure I was. But *que voulez-vous?* It was a horrible situation. I cannot give hints where there's something serious at stake. I said to him every disagreeable, brutal thing that I could think of. I was determined he should not be able to say I had thrown myself at him. I can't prostrate myself before any one—even him. And I am sure I can never say that he showed any indecent eagerness to clutch at me. I represented to him that through his machinations I was going to be left perfectly alone and desolate—that my brother had left me—that Nelly was coming to turn me out of my old home—that Giles had been snatched away from me by his sister—and that he himself, after professing to be my devoted friend, and making me eat all kinds of humble-pie for my good—oh, purely for my good, of course—was going abroad, and leaving me to manage as well as I could. He was frantic—oh, he was angry!' she continued, with a laugh of delight at the recollection of it. 'Of course I was accused of misunderstanding motives, and all the rest of it. I said I looked at results, not motives, which was an awful fib in some respects. Then I got him on another tack; and told him he would never succeed—he would never rise beyond the ranks, or make any stir on his own account, and that he ought to marry a rich woman.'

'How could you? It was like a cat and a mouse.'

'I believe it was, just then. But I say, once more, *que voulez-vous?* I had to find out something—whether he really loved me, or whether it was merely some sentimental liking that would stand no test.'

'As if you had not known it for long enough!'

'No, I hadn't. You know nothing about it. But after a little while I did know it. I said something to him—never mind what—which threw him off his guard. A look and a word showed me all about it. Then I had him at my disposal. After a few more civilities on either side, he somewhat recovered himself, and said it did not matter—that he had betrayed himself, he meant. He was now going. I said, just one word—of course he would write to me while he was abroad.'

Write to you—well!'

'Well—exactly! I wish, my dear Mrs. Ashby, that you could have seen your mild, patient, perfect, gentle brother, when I preferred that innocent request. He turned upon me with his eyes flashing, and his face crimson—such a savage,

passionate little boy—and said, "Write to you—send you my soul to make candle-lighters of? I'll be" (nodding) "if I'll do anything of the kind."'

'What a scene! How did it end?'

'Well, next came the disagreeable part for me. I had had my turn at probing him, and making him tell me more than he wanted to, and had got him into rather more of a rage than I had intended to. Then I had, as our old Irish beggar-woman used to say, to "soother him down." It was—it was—well, it took me longer than I had expected, and I had to speak more plainly than I had intended doing,' said Alizon, rather hurriedly. 'Because he was more than offended. I can always cure people of being offended with me—he was hurt and sore, and cut up about it. He never took into consideration what it was costing me to do it all—because I'm not an advocate for letting women propose to men to marry them, except in unusual cases. I did succeed. He was too generous to put me through what he had gone through himself. But he would not give up this coming abroad. He said he would never marry me until he had proved to his own satisfaction that he could do something—he had never done anything yet. In fact, to tell the whole truth, I had to take him on his terms, and I had fully intended that he should take me on mine.'

'I'm delighted to hear it. Then, was it a real engagement? He has kept saying, "We both shall know when the right time comes." What did he mean?'

'That was what we agreed. I've only heard from him once, and only written to him once, since he left England. It was through Mrs. Barras's grudging bits of information that I gathered he was prospering and getting on, and now I shall have to tear him away from it all. Because there's something more important for him to do—at least I think so—now, than even to build up a fashionable practice in New York.'

'Indeed, and what is that?'

'I haven't told him yet. I shall, as soon as he is fit. If I mistake not, he will not make it too hard for me, this time. You have not heard of the responsibilities which have descended upon my shoulders?'

'No, indeed.'

'Peregrine made a will, Hilda—let me pass it over, and say as little about it as possible,' she said, in a slower, lower voice, 'but this much, without reproaching him, I must say—a will in which he consulted simply his own convenience and wishes. He had got very fond of his boy, and had begun to think a

good deal about Maudie too—but his feelings towards his wife had undergone no change. In this will he leaves me joint-guardian with her of the children. He does not in so many words divest her of authority, but nothing is to be done about their education, or in any way concerning them, without my consent. That is how he puts it. To her he leaves simply a large jointure, and the right to live at Underwood until Saxon grows up and marries, or until she may herself marry again. All the rest of the estate—that which will have to be looked after for the children till they are both one-and-twenty—a long time to come—is in my hands, to manage and administer and arrange in every way. It is a large estate, and rather a complicated one. You see, he spent next to nothing compared with what would have been spent if he had had his health, and everything had been smooth, and they had lived together in the position that would have been natural for them to take. I see no end of business before me; no end of rocks ahead. Nelly is not too well-pleased about it all; she feels she is playing second fiddle, and I may have a lot of trouble with her. As a matter of fact, there is enough business to take up all my time and brains just to see to their affairs and their education and all the rest of it, never to mention my own humble possessions. I don't feel in the least inclined to sink myself into a mere steward for my nephew and niece, though I love them both, poor little creatures! I want a little time for myself, and a little happiness for myself. Alone I cannot have them. But he can help me to get them, and as I shall hurt no one by getting them—in that way—I don't see why I should go without them. He need not think it would be all a bed of roses, or trouble himself with the idea that he would be just "hanging up his hat," as people are sometimes odious enough to say. No,' she went on softly, 'I have my dream, Hilda, and there is one person who can realise it for me. Do you think he will harshly refuse to do so?'

'Not if you speak to him *like that*,' said Hilda, tears rushing to her eyes. 'But mind, no tormenting him now!'

'You goose! Have I forgotten his helping hand, and his utter goodness and unselfishness all through that dreadful six months? Never! Besides,' she added, with a sudden change of tone, 'I see you don't understand me, even yet. I will not have you misunderstand me, so I may as well make a clean breast of it. You think I tormented him, as you call it, just for the fun of the thing, do you?'

'Well—I think you like to prove your power.'

'Ah! Perhaps I do, sometimes. That time it was because I was—I did not—I was afraid to let him see what power he had over me, if he chose to use it. I was afraid he would think me bold and forward—I, who never cared a button what any one thought of me. I was distracted. Hilda—' she looked at her friend with a deep colour spreading over her face, and went on, almost in a whisper, 'I knew I loved him, and that made me afraid. Surely you can understand.'

'Yes,' said Hilda, with a deep sigh, caressing the hand which Alizon had laid on her knee. 'I understand. It seems almost too wonderful to be true.'

'And I am afraid now. I feel I ought to speak, but I'm putting it off from day to day. Of course I shall feel all right again some day. It is too preposterous to be afraid of any one. But I am, just now. . . . Meanwhile,' she added, with a rapid change of manner, while Hilda looked at her with a smile, 'it is very good to be with you. I could stay on here indefinitely. He is getting better, and yet he's not so well as to be very formidable. You are so good to me; and your husband is a very nice man really——'

'Thank you! How relieved he will be to know that you really think that,' said Hilda, laughing.

'He isn't fond of me, you know,' said Alizon, patting her hand. 'Never mind! He would be hospitable to a porcupine if you said it was a friend of yours.'

'I believe he would, replied Hilda; and then they were both silent, in the firelight, for some time, until at last Harold came into the room, and said his patient was decidedly restless.

'He wants something to eat or drink, of course,' said Alizon, promptly; 'how inhuman of you to starve him in that manner.'

One cold afternoon in February, Hilda, returning home from a round of calls, opened the library door softly, and looked in. It was growing dark. The firelight danced on the walls. She saw that her brother was there, on the couch which he was still obliged to rest upon for part of the day, and that Alizon was sitting beside the couch, on the skin which was spread before the hearth. Hilda's heart sprang up, and she would have gone away again, but Alizon called out to her, without turning her head.

'Hilda, that's you,' she said, and stretched out her hand. 'Come in! We've been wishing you would come back. Something has happened for which nothing has occurred to prepare you.'

'Then I may not say I know what it is. Something good, I'll hope,' she said, going towards them, and looking into both their faces.

'The best thing in the world—for me,' said Alizon, in a voice that was a caress, as she looked up towards her lover's face, and placed her hand upon his. 'He is going to give up all his prospects here, and come home and help me through my troubles. Here is trouble number one: this is what moved him to pity.'

She handed a paper to Hilda, who stooped and read it by the firelight. It was from Mr. Barnett, the Blundells' solicitor, and it said:

'*Your presence here urgently needed. Mrs. B. raises many difficulties.—Barnett.*'

'That is the second within ten days,' said Alizon, tranquilly. 'I did not answer the first. This I must reply to, or the poor man will go mad and shoot or hang himself.'

Her voice was unsteady, as she tried to laugh. Hilda returned the paper, and said:

'I am so glad.'

'That he will shoot himself? Fie!'

'No, but that you will both go and save him from shooting himself,' she answered, laughing, but with tears behind her laugh.

'See how glad she is to get rid of you!' said Alizon to Godfrey, who smiled a little and said yes, he had remarked it at once.

As a matter of fact, when, a month later, a reply to a third imperative summons from the distracted Mr. Barnett was cabled by Godfrey, to say they were sailing on the following day, Alizon had been his wife for a week. Her last words to the Ashbys before the steamer began to move were:

'What will Nelly be doing now? What will she say when she wants to make a grand row, or to turn things upside down, and I say *he* won't allow it?'

She looked into his face with a smile that had in it a gleam of the old mockery.

It does not come within the province of this history to relate what Nelly said. The ship began slowly to move, in answer to the throbbing of her propeller. The last wave of hand and handkerchief was exchanged. The husband and wife on shore strained their eyes after the husband and wife who were leaning

over the taffrail arm in arm repeating ever and again, 'good-bye!' Soon the ocean would be between them.

'How happy I am!' said Hilda, with a sigh of contentment, after a long silence, as she drove homewards with her husband. 'Happy for myself, and very happy for Godfrey. He has his heart's desire now.'

'H'm!' said Harold, a somewhat uncertain note in his voice.

'What do you mean? That she will not make him happy!'

'Oh, not at all—one man's happiness is another man's misery. Of course he is infatuated about her. He likes all that storminess and abruptness. You say he has his heart's desire. Speaking from my own prosaic point of view, and vulgarly, I should say she will lead him a life of it.'

'He will never repent it,' said Hilda, in a tone of profound conviction.

'I am sure he never will. There is too much at stake—all his life and happiness—for him to indulge in repentance.'

'He wouldn't if he might. I see we shall never think alike about that, Harold, so we will agree to differ till we go to see them after they have been married a year or two, and then——'

'With all my heart. . . . How empty the house will seem, now that they have really gone, not to come back.'

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